"RIMLAND" IS STILL SIGNIFICANT: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERVENTIONS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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Abstract: The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a vast and diverse aquatic biogeographic region that has been a constant focus of international discourse due to its centrality as a significant trade route. This paper discusses recent developments in the Indian Ocean Region. Due to its strategic location, it has always been a geopolitical hotspot. This research paper examines the causes of the turmoil in the Indian Ocean and its consequences. India faces numerous opportunities and challenges in the IOR. Coastal diversity has brought many serious problems to coastal regions. The paper discusses the instability in coastal countries of the area and its impact on maritime security. How coastal instability would shape the future of the Indian Ocean is a big question. India's role in the stability and welfare of the Ocean has also been explored.

Introduction

Oceans have always connected many parts of the world, and therefore, they have their own historical and geographical significance. The Atlantic and Pacific are vast oceans open to the north and south, but the Indian Ocean is almost completely closed off to the north. In the north, it is surrounded by coastal countries. There are only a few routes to go somewhere; those are the Sea Lanes of Communication. The Red Sea and the Malacca Straight are the most significant. Control of the sea routes continues to have a significant impact on the global economy. Nicholas J. Spykman long ago described the coastal areas as part of the Rimland and as the most critical region. The Indian Ocean holds its own importance as three major continents surround it on three sides.

The primary associated regions of the Ocean are parts of Southeast Asia, South Asia, the eastern coast of Africa, the Middle East, and the islands located in the Ocean, ranging from the Indonesian Islands on the east side to the Comoros archipelago on the west. The Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) effectively connect the eastern countries of the world with the Western countries. Incredibly vast and diverse in terms of topographic features and culture, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is crucial for global trade, security, and geopolitics. If anyone examines diversity, it is not only geographical but also encompasses political, social, and economic diversity. For example, the lifestyles and politics of Western Asia differ significantly from those of South and Southeast Asia. The African region still largely retains its tribal socio-political structures. The coasts of this vast geographical area are highly diverse, and numerous countries are situated along its shores, where approximately 2.7 billion people reside (Baruah, 2021).

Its diversity and linkages have given rise to many problems in history. Still, those problems persist in one form or another. Europeans had been interested in the Indian Ocean after the Renaissance. With time, as modern nation-states emerged, the world's superpowers have been very active in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Therefore, there is always a tussle between the superpowers here. Between 1650 and 1950, when colonialism was at its peak, this tussle primarily pitted European colonial powers against each other, including Britain,

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Portugal, and Spain. Today, it is still seen between Europe and many other rising powers, such as China, the United States of America, India, Russia, and numerous Asian and African countries. India has been a pivotal presence in the IOR; consequently, it faces numerous significant challenges in the surrounding sea region.

This research is entirely analytical; therefore, books, research papers, and various government-provided data have been used. Internet resources have been utilized as needed. Quantitative data is used in policy-based research, as in this research paper. Research Objectives of this paper are: 1) To analyze the growing conflicts between superpowers in the Indian Ocean; 2) To understand the efforts being made by India to establish stability in the Indian Ocean Region.

I. Literature Review

Whenever a discussion of maritime trade or maritime politics arises, the Indian Ocean is the first to be mentioned, as it has always been geopolitically significant. External powers have always had an eye on the sea routes. European powers ruled over their coastal countries for a very long time and, along with that, kept control over their essential sea routes. Although this is not the case now, the Ocean is still full of navies of different countries. Scholars are uncertain whether the Indian Ocean should be regarded as a region of peace or unrest, given that the army is deployed to restore peace. However, the presence of naval fleets in the ocean region itself contributes to considerable unrest. This militarization has created other threats, such as pollution and biodiversity loss, which are constantly discussed, but no definitive conclusion has been reached that can completely resolve the environmental issues.

Koshy (2024) writes that "from 1950-2020, the IOR is warmed by 1.2°C and climate models anticipate it to warm by 1.7°C to 3.8°C by 2020-2100. In this era, everyone is well aware of heat waves on land, which are extremely painful. However, the formation of "marine heat waves" would lead to the rapid formation of strong cyclones. Cyclone formation is expected to increase 10-fold from the recent average of 20 days per year to 220-250 days." It will be a terrifying situation. There are multiple contributing factors to marine heat waves, including the presence of a large naval fleet and increased trade in the waters. It is crucial to analyze IOR issues with well-reasoned arguments and to consider India's potential role in preserving biodiversity and resolving conflicts. How India is using challenges as an opportunity to strengthen their capacity is interesting.

The Indian Ocean realm is the third geostrategic region, following the dependent maritime world and the Eurasian Continental world (Dowdy & Trood, 1983, 432). The Indian Ocean has historical, geographical, and strategic dimensions, and it has become a newly salient geostrategic region. The argument is entirely accurate due to the geostrategic value of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). According to Spykman, the Indian Ocean is part of the Rimland area. Rimland can still control the world, as it is home to many Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and choke points. SLOCs and choke points are areas through which goods are transported between countries. Any unrest around the Red Sea and the Malacca Strait of the Indian Ocean would disrupt global energy supplies. Hence, energy demand and energy prices both would increase. Consequently, the prices of goods and commodities would rise. Economically, Chock points are the most vulnerable areas. Ravindra Varma (1967), in "Strategic Importance of Indian Ocean," writes that the Indian Ocean region lies between the two political worlds of the USA and the USSR.

Initially, the Soviet Union was primarily concerned with enhancing its political influence among the littoral republics. For its part, the US intended to demonstrate its interest in ensuring that oil would continue to flow from the unstable region of Southwest Asia. For the superpowers, both objectives remain crucial (Andersen, 1989, 15). However, after the

disintegration of the Soviet Union, the only remaining hegemonic body, the USA, intervened significantly in the oil-rich world to boost its interests. In October 2007, the United States issued a new maritime strategy, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power," also known as CS21. The Combined Maritime Forces, comprising three forces: Combined Task Force (CTF) 150, 151, and CTF 152, have been formed as multinational task forces to monitor maritime matters. With an emphasis on tracking and stopping the flow of people and supplies from terrorist groups, CTF 150 carries out maritime security operations in the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Oman, and the Gulf of Aden. (Bradford, 2011,191).

The conflict at sea has been the conflict of civilizations. Many civilizations have flourished around the Indian Ocean, such as those of the Indus and the Tigris-Euphrates. The conflict of civilizations is evident everywhere. Currently, the leading countries with a strong presence in the Indian Ocean include China, India, the European Union, the United States, Australia, and Japan. The presence of so many countries can create a dire situation in the future. These countries have a presence in numerous strategic locations, including many islands and coastal areas. They are not ready to compromise on their interests in any way. However, many coastal countries themselves are struggling with political instability, so they do not even want to think about the security of the Indian Ocean.

The unstable countries are mainly those in Africa and the Arab countries bordering the Indian Ocean to the west. Somalia and Kenya are among the most prominent nations in the region. Yemen and Oman are also in a similar situation; it is unclear when stability will be disrupted there. Due to instability, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea are constantly in turmoil. Nights on the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea are full of smugglers' speedboats and their smuggling of drugs, cigarettes, and small arms. Large quantities of arms are sent from Yemen to Somalia, and some are smuggled back to Yemen to supply local rebels. Human trafficking is also going the other way. Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Somalis cross the strait at night to reach Yemen to get relief from poverty and violence in the Horn of Africa. Many of them are captured by the army, and many are killed in various incidents at sea (Pekasting, 2011, 90). Although there have been some changes over time, they have not been as significant as they should have been.

Following the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan is increasingly dependent on China for its security. At the same time, China itself remains an external power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The CPEC Authority was established by Pakistan in 2019 to ensure uninterrupted progress on its projects and facilitate coordination between the relevant departments. According to the Pakistani newspaper Dawn (2022), Federal Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives Minister Professor Ahsan Iqbal stated that the unit has not attracted any investment since its inception. He also stated that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Authority would be dissolved. Initially, there was a ruckus at the international level regarding the CPEC, but it has since reduced somewhat. It is failing economically in the long run. However, it has been strategically beneficial for China.

II. Ocean Conflict and China's Role

China's prime target is to maintain its strong presence on the sea routes of the Indian Ocean rather than Pakistan's progress. It has also made efforts in this direction; for instance, China has constantly emphasized maintaining its PLA Navy presence in the Ocean. Pakistan is being drawn into the illusion of China's expansionist policy, which it will come to understand too late. It is worth mentioning the Belt and Road Initiative here, a massive infrastructure project led by China that aims to expand its global influence. It is especially effective in countries with economic weakness, as their infrastructure has not yet been fully developed. China is

constantly working on this through its debt policy (McBride et al., 2023). Lending pressure on governments is also a form of colonization. One of China's aims under this policy is to strengthen its position in countries along the Indian Ocean coast. However, many countries have objections to this, including the United States. It is viewed more as a project to enhance China's military capabilities. Protests have also started against this project in many countries. They are concerned about future consequences, but no significant results have been obtained yet.

The PLA Navy's presence in the oceanic region has been growing steadily since 2009. China has military or naval bases in several locations, including Gwadar, Pakistan; Hambantota, Sri Lanka; Chittagong, Bangladesh; and Kyaukpyu and the Coco Islands, Myanmar. In this way, China is constantly devising a strategy to surround India; therefore, India needs to be stronger and more vigilant in the ocean region (Dev, 2024). According to a report by the US Naval Institute, "Such a capability would provide China with trans-oceanic access from a single platform." Rahul Dev (2024) writes that not only this, but the PLA Navy also has several locations that will likely become future naval or military bases, including Nay Ream (Cambodia), Nacala (Mozambique), Luganville (Vanuatu, east of Australia), and its presence in the Indian Ocean. Apart from this, China has also recently approached the United Arab Emirates, Namibia, Nigeria, and the Solomon Islands about establishing naval bases. It is part of a larger plan; in the future, its impact will be seen in both India and the Indian Ocean.

India should be cautious about the potential impacts of the new naval base at Ream in the Gulf of Thailand, Cambodia. Many analysts argue that this maritime base could shift the power balance of the Indo-Pacific region. Before China established the naval base, some buildings funded by the US had been demolished. The USA is also suspicious of the change. It is looking towards India. The growing dominance of China in the Malacca region can bring many problems in foreign trade. The Strait of Malacca is a crucial sea route to the Bay of Bengal.

In their paper, Dr. Yu Jin and John Wallace (2021) state that the Belt and Road Initiative has three primary goals. The international competition between China and the USA is most commonly observed in economic affairs. The majority of Chinese commercial goods must cross the Strait of Malacca, which is situated near Singapore's coast. It must reach the Singaporean seas, which are a key ally of the United States. China has sought to strengthen the security of its trade routes. The Chinese government is making a concerted effort to enhance its political and economic influence. For this reason, China plans to make the participating nations' economies dependent on China. The initiative's other primary motivation is the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which has already made China wary that, even in the unlikely event that such a scenario materializes, its effects should be negligible.

In response to the financial crisis, the Chinese government awarded contracts to build airports, bridges, and railroads as part of a ¥4 trillion stimulus package. However, in the process, it oversupplied Chinese markets with commodities. For China's massive state-owned enterprises, the Belt and Road architecture offers a different market outside of its boundaries where they can more readily sell their products. Last but not least, the Chinese government's attempts to strengthen the economies of China's core provinces—particularly those that have traditionally trailed behind the affluent coastal regions—are viewed as being aided by the Belt and Road plan. By providing sizable budgets and enticing companies to bid for Belt and Road contracts, the government leverages the project to promote and assist companies in these strategic areas. China is thus seeking to increase both its growth and influence. Judging by the growing intimidation of the PLA Navy, it appears to be unwilling to compromise. On the other hand, the USA is also competing for supremacy in the Indian Ocean, so the rivalry between the superpowers is likely to intensify there in the coming years.

III. Indian Ocean Conflict and Unrest in Coastal Countries

The Ocean is under the influence of active pirates day and night. A significant portion of global trade is conducted through these routes, making their security particularly crucial. China also cites this security when its Navy enters the Ocean. Similarly, the United States aims to maintain its presence in the Indian Ocean for security reasons. The United States maintains its presence on Diego Garcia and, somewhere or other, it keeps sending troops around the Red Sea, citing the security of sea routes. Although pirate attacks are primarily in the Arabian Sea, some incidents have also been reported in the Bay of Bengal. Apart from Somali piracy, the Black Sea dispute, the Ukraine dispute, the Houthi rebellion, the Panama Canal crisis, and even the collapse of the Baltimore Bridge, all have been turbulent incidents. Despite numerous efforts and plans, the issue remains unresolved, although additional plans are in place (Shrikhande, 2024). The United States is also facing many rebellions that stand against it.

Retired Rear Admiral Sudarshan Shrikhande of the Indian Navy (2024) writes that the Houthis rebels' Ansar Allah movement has stated political goals regarding the Gaza conflict and is attacking ships belonging to people they perceive as competitors. It has had a significant strategic influence on international trade. The nations that have deployed warships and other instruments of force have also found it challenging to create strategic coherence and consistent policy goals backed by well-coordinated actions. A much stronger cohesion is needed. It is also difficult for the United States to achieve effective partnerships, as many surrounding Arab countries are angry with the United States' policies. There are many such strategic complexities. Others are just helping with constabulary duties, and only the US and Royal Navies are involved in power projection operations. There appears to be a significant geopolitical intrigue behind the Houthi rebels' helicopter attack on the frigate Galaxy Leader on November 19, 2023, and their subsequent substantial operations in the Red Sea using drones, anti-ship ballistic missiles, and other weaponry and new technology.

It is also essential to discuss Operation Prosperity Guardian in this context. That is a military operation led by the United States, formed by the Multinational Coalition for Maritime Security in the Red Sea in December 2023. It was formed to respond to attacks led by Houthi attackers on ships and maritime merchants. Through this, the United States has shown a powerful presence. According to Phillips (2023), this operation's primary goal is to provide complete security and freedom of marine commerce in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Aden—a complex undertaking. He claims that the start of the 2023 Israel-Hamas conflict had a significant impact on the northern Arabian Sea and that Houthi troops then assaulted and took control of several civilian cargo and container ships in the Gulf of Aden. Open-source intelligence shows several commercial cargo ships have been attacked or boarded by drones and missiles in this period, as the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen vowed to attack ships headed to Israel.

The things written and the incidents told by Phillips show that this Ocean is facing the brunt of violence and will continue to do so because it is tough to have a stable and strong government in the unstable countries of West Asia. Whenever there is any possibility of stability in those countries, some situation or another arises, and violence, arson, and war start again. Somewhere, there is a robust network and control by external powers in these countries that do not want peace to prevail in West Asia. If any region is most affected by interference from external countries, it is West Asia; similarly, if any ocean is most affected, it is the Indian Ocean.

Well, only time will tell whether Operation Prosperity Guardian is successful, but it is also important to mention here the Combined Task Forces formed by the United States. A

total of five Combined Task Forces operate in the Arabian Sea - Combined Task Forces (CTF) 150, 151, 152, 153, and CTF 154. Established on April 17, 2022, Combined Task Forces 153 (CTF 153) is a Red Sea maritime security project led by the US Navy with the goal of "focusing on inter-national maritime security and efforts of capacity enhancement in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Bab al-Mandeb." America's ally in this endeavor is Egypt. This series includes Operation Prosperity Guardian, which unites several nation-states, including the United Kingdom (UK), Bahrain, France, Canada, Italy, Seychelles, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain, to resolve security issues in the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea. According to US Defence Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, the objective is to guarantee all nations' freedom of passage while advancing regional security and prosperity.

IV. Oceanic Peace Efforts and India

India has also taken full membership in the multinational US-led Combined Maritime Force (CMF), announced in November 2023, which represents a significant step forward in India-US relations. India has a very long coastline along the Arabian Sea and, as a considerable power in the Indian Ocean, its role in this region is crucial. The presence of the Indian Navy is essential because, with two strong powers, India will also need to consider its security. Membership in the Combined Maritime Force is a crucial component of a safe sea policy, particularly for India, which faces increased challenges from China. If observed, the Arabian Sea is more significant geopolitically because the most intense conflicts of interest occur in this region. The Bay of Bengal is comparatively calm.

However, there are important sea routes in the east, like the Strait of Malacca, which connects China and Japan to the rest of Asia, Africa, and Europe. However, the presence of oil-producing countries and the oil trade make the Arabian Sea a unique region. Oil from West Asia is transported to various countries through the Arabian Sea, and today's politics revolves around oil and its transportation. When China has already become Pakistan-oriented, India's slight inclination towards America can be the right approach from the perspective of maritime security. Pakistan may show its presence where India is. CPEC has already been mentioned. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the most convenient and secure route for transporting oil and other resources imported by China into its own territory.

Sana Jamal (2022) writes that on January 24, 2022, in a program held at the Pakistan Naval Dockyard in Karachi, Pakistan, the Pakistani Navy introduced the most advanced Type-054 A/P multi-mission frigate, which was 'PNS Tugril'. China has given this warship to the Pakistani Navy and stated that it will enhance the Pakistani Navy's capabilities in the Arabian Sea, suggesting that China is attempting to convey its intentions through this medium. It is constantly trying to woo Pakistan. China may also be trying to demonstrate its power, as it perceives the Quad Group and CMF as potential adversaries. Pakistan's Ambassador to China, Moinul Haq, said that the arrival of this warship will maintain the balance of power in the IOR. It is essential to note that China has established military bases in Djibouti and Gwadar, Pakistan. In this way, he is keeping an eye on both the US Combined Task Force and the Indian Navy.

Given this unspoken alliance between China and Pakistan, India must maintain a sharp eye in every respect. Ways to balance power must be found. However, India has been doing this consistently and successfully; the behavior of international politics cannot be easily assessed. Anything is possible in it. Peace in the region can be established only through the cooperation and understanding of all the coastal countries. They must understand that external powers are using them for their own benefit. Recently, at the Maritime Conclave held in Goa, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said that having too many troops can create numerous obstacles in the Indian Ocean. In his speech, he stated that the "SAGAR" goal, as

announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, represents a significant step towards the region's security. SAGAR means Security and Growth for All in the Region. Through SAGAR, India has urged all coastal countries to respect each other's sovereignty and resolve any disputes through mutual discussion, thereby adhering to international rules.

Only time will tell whether this initiative has any impact on other countries. For now, this is a commendable effort by India, as development is only possible through the restoration of peace. When there is peace, situations like war would not arise, and as a result, the sea would be protected from the pollution that comes in large quantities, and the biodiversity there would also be preserved. If all the naval exercises conducted are aimed at restoring peace, then peace can be established. India also recently completed its naval exercise "Dosti" in collaboration with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. This exercise has been ongoing for almost ten years to reduce the impact of incidents at sea, mitigate marine pollution, and provide the coast guards with new insights into marine security and oil spill response. Along with "Sagar," India also initiated the "Indian Ocean Naval Symposium," established in 2008. India played a significant role in its inception, as the idea originated with the Indian Navy. So far, the results have been highly successful, but with continued efforts, further success is expected. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium was held in 2020, with a significant emphasis on responses to natural disasters.

Disaster relief is a huge issue. Countries like the Maldives in the Indian Ocean are bearing the brunt of global warming, and in the future, they may sink into the depths of the Ocean. What could be a bigger disaster for them than this? The 24 countries participating in the naval symposium need to consider the future of the Indian Ocean in great detail. Otherwise, it will become the largest source of future conflict. That conflict will be related to environmental pollution and the displacement of homeless people, along with naval conflict.

From December 19 to 22, the Royal Thai Naval Force sponsored the eighth issue of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium's (IONS) Conclave of Chiefs (COC) in Bangkok, Thailand. The event was attended by naval chiefs and many senior experienced delegates from almost 27 member and observer states. Admiral R. H. Kumar, Chief of the Naval Staff, and a delegation of three Indian Navy personnel were present at the occasion. During the 9th COC, which will be convened in India in late 2025, India is also expected to assume the role of Chair of IONS (2025–27). (Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 2023). It is undoubtedly a huge diplomatic success for India. The bottom line is that organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and even powerful nations must be sensitized to issues in the Indian Ocean. India's endeavor is always to be a peacemaker.

Conclusion

The USA and China have demonstrated a strong presence in the IOR over the last decade. Although the United Kingdom (UK), Bahrain, France, Canada, Italy, Seychelles, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain do not have a heavy military presence in the region, they are concerned about the security of the Ocean's SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication). They are helping navies like CTF. The struggle for power in the Indian Ocean has been ongoing in every era and will continue, as every century has its own unique global politics. The power balance has shifted with the emergence of new superpowers in each century. However, the current issues of environmental degradation and destruction of marine biodiversity were not present earlier. Therefore, in this century, cooperation is needed more than conflict. National interest is paramount in international politics; therefore, India is also addressing its interests amid the new challenges that continually arise. India has made many efforts to establish peace while protecting its interests. Coastal security is crucial because numerous resources and a large population are concentrated along the coasts. Indeed, India's security has strengthened,

and with initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and "SAGAR," a new step has been taken toward peace and cooperation. Peace will come to the Ocean only when there is peace in the coastal countries; otherwise, the countries whose interests will be harmed will continue to send their armies to the sea, citing maritime security, or will become allies of someone. It is what is happening in the Indian Ocean. If other coastal countries cooperate in peacekeeping efforts, it will benefit balanced regional development. The "Rimland" regions remain the most significant in terms of trade, economy, and security.

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