

## Geopolitics Of Indian Ocean: Emerging Trends

**Abstract:** *The Indian Ocean has gradually emerged as a significant region in terms of the economic and geopolitical patterns of the world powers. In the contemporary power struggles, it has become a most important contesting ground for global dominance. This research analyses the geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean and the interests of regional and great powers in it. The study is particularly focusing on two sub-regions of the Indian Ocean (IO) (Arabian Gulf and South Asia) and is mainly probing the strategic competition between New Delhi and Islamabad in these areas. And the structural enforcement these South Asian countries are receiving from Washington and Beijing. Active engagements of great powers in the said regions also highlight the global dynamic of strategic competition IO. The research concludes that different strategies adopted by regional and global powers to increase their sphere of influence in IOR are consequently enhancing strategic dilemma and initiating arms race between regional powers and that any mishandling can easily end up in a war, which may not be an ordinary one because all the states focused in the current study are nuclear capable.*

**Key Words:** Indian Ocean, China, USA, India, Pakistan and Arabian-Gulf

### Introduction

During Cold War and in the post-Cold War era, the European and American continents dominated the international political structure. This domination can be attributed to the economic, military and technological sophistication of said regions. However, after 9/11, America, because of its involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, faced a huge economic thrashing. While China appeared as an economic giant and India is also performing considerably in economic and military fields. Most of all, Russia started reemerging as a major player in global politics. Due to all these

developments, some scholars voiced that the global economic structure has shifted from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific ([Regional Office of Asia and the Pacific, nd](#)). This fact led to strategic competition among potential powers in different regions of the world, and among them, IO is the most prominent and significant. This is because IO is a connecting point between Oceania, Asia, Africa and Europe. It is also the most important point for global energy transportation. Control of this ocean is a key to dominating global trade and politics. Thus, IO emerged as one of the leading regions in the contemporary international

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scenario. China and USA are involved in a web of diplomatic and strategic moves and counter-moves to establish their dominance and deter each other influence in the region. For this purpose, they have developed a strategic alliance with Pakistan and India, respectively.

IOR is a vast area which is divided into a number of sub-regions like South Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Red Sea and Africa. This study would be limited to two sub-regions: South Asia and the Arabian Gulf ([Cordesman, Toukan, 2014](#)). The study focuses on these two regions because of their enormous political, strategic and economic importance. Arabian Gulf consists of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait, home to energy-rich countries of the world. Gulf waters consist of important strategic points like the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-ul-Mandeb, which are the most important points in global maritime traffic. South Asia's importance lies in the fact that it is home to the largest state of IO (India) and is a linking point between the energy-rich and energy-deficient regions. It is also a conflict-torn region because of Indo-Pak rivalry. Throughout Cold War, the region played an important role in great power rivalry. Its importance got multiplied after the introduction of nuclear weapons in its strategic landscape. South Asia and Arabian Gulf are of utmost importance for the Chinese and American quest to dominate IOR. Being littoral, all Gulf and South Asia states have stakes in IO as well as in the emerging Sino-US strategic competition. India and Pakistan are important components of global realignment, where India emerged as the most important state in America's strategy of countering China. At the same time, Pakistan joined the Chinese Camp by collaborating with *China Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC). All these facts are evidence that the Indian Ocean is a major contesting point of contemporary international relations. Thus it is quite apt to study major power rivalry in the region as

well to analyse the impact of this struggle on the stability and geopolitics of the international system.

## Geostrategic Significance of the Indian Ocean

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After Pacific and Atlantic, IO is the third largest ocean. According to CIA Fact Book, its total area is about 68.556 million sq km, which equates to 20 per cent of international water bodies ([the Indian Ocean in World History, nd](#)). From the North, it is connected to South Asia, from West to Africa and Gulf region. In its East, there is Australia, Sundra Islands and the Malay Peninsula, and from the South, it is connected to the Southern Ocean. Thus is a linking point between Asia, Africa, Australia and Antarctica. The Indian Ocean is also home to strategically important choke points. These choke points play an important role in global trade and connectivity. More than eighty per cent of global oil trade flows through the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca and Ba-al-Mendab. (Ocean Geography, nd).

Geo-economic importance of the region lies in the fact that it is home to 16.8 per cent and 27.9 per cent of global oil and gas reserves. Some fastest growing economies also lay on its shores ([Jeffrey, 2019](#)). It is estimated that the USA (16 %), China (39 %), Japan (80 %) and Europe (21 %) are the major recipients of Gulf oil. Thus Maritime trade is an important aspect of IOR. Ports of Singapore, Djibouti, the Sri Lankan port of Colombo and Kenya's port of Mombasa are the most important ports for the Maritime container traffic ([Kannangara, Collins & Waidyatilake, 2018](#)). According to experts, transportation and trade are much cheaper at Sea as compared to land and air routes. Thus security of these Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) is a major concern of stakeholders ([Vivedo, 2011](#)). According to 2017 estimates, regional countries contributed 17.8 per cent and 35.5 per cent to international gold and iron production.

Apart from this, IO is also the largest source of seafood. The fishing industry is also contributing heavily to the economies of littoral states ([Kannangara, Collins & Waidyatilake, 2018](#)).

## National interests of Concerned States in IOR

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Owing to the above-mentioned worth, Mahan declared the control of IO as a prerequisite for global hegemony. Historically Great Britain enjoyed supremacy in the ocean, which was replaced by the USA in the Post-Cold war era ([David, 2009](#)). Changing nature of international structure in the post-9/11 era has brought this area into the limelight, and today IO is an important contesting point among great powers. Though a number of states are involved in balancing and rebalancing activities in IOR, the current section will only focus on the US, China, India and Pakistan. In order to understand the nature and extent of Sino-US competition and their alliance with Pakistan and India for gaining their vested interests, it is very important to understand the national interests of all stakeholders.

### USA

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Since Cold War USA has enjoyed dominance in the Persian Gulf through large numbers of its naval and military bases in different regional states. Thus one of the chief US interests in the region is to retain its influence. Other important objects can be enlisted as follows:

- Three important maritime routes through which Asia is supplying useful commodities to the West are the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-al-Mendab and Suez Canal. Ensuring the safety and security of these SLOC is at the heart of US interests.
- As most littoral states of IO are having the issue of terrorism and extremism.

Thus countering terrorism, ensuring human rights and restoration of democracy are important Foreign policy objectives of the USA.

- Countering the proliferation of Weapon of Mass destruction in the IOR is also an important foreign policy initiative of the USA ([Sokolsky, 2003](#))
- In South Asia, US interests lie in maintaining a close strategic partnership with India as a counterbalance to increasing Chinese influence in Asia.

### China

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Compared to the USA, Chinese interests can be defined both in economic and strategic terms. Its interests are as follows:

- China is the largest consumer of oil and natural gas. Almost seventy per cent of its oil needs and fifty-two per cent of gas needs are fulfilled through imports from different littoral states of IO. And eighty per cent of its trade flows through IO, where the Chinese don't have any naval presence.
- A strong presence of India and America in these waters leaves China vulnerable during the events of crises. Thus the foremost Chinese interest is the protection of its SLOCs.
- China is one of the fastest growing economies and also expanding its military muscles to consolidate its position in the global power structure. Thus, power projection is an important objective behind increasing influence in IOR ([Sharma, 2001](#))
- China is facing insurgency and separatist movements in its Muslim-dominated Eastern region. It is fearful that these might get the support of Sunni jihadists. Thus important Foreign Policy objective behind enhanced political, diplomatic and economic relations with the littoral

states of the Arabian Gulf is to discourage their support to these separatist elements ([Scobel & Nadar, 2016](#))

- In South Asia, China is aimed at backing Pakistan as a balancer to India, and its deepwater Gawadar sea port will provide the shortest and safest routines for Beijing's energy imports.

## **India**

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India, with a 72,500 km coastline, 2 million sq. km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the custodian of more than 1200 islands, is the largest state of IO. Keeping in view its geographical location India has always aspired to become a dominant power in IOR. Containment of extra-regional powers from gaining a strong foothold in the region is another important objective of India. As most of the Indian energy needs are fulfilled by the Gulf States, and this region is also home to a large number of Indian Diaspora, this area is of vital importance to Indian interests, and it aspires to increase its diplomatic, political and security influence in the region. More than 80 per cent of India's trade passes through IO; thus, securing these lines of communication is another important objective (Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy, 2015)

## **Pakistan**

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Pakistan, with a coastline of 1001 km, 240,000 sq km EEZ and a continental shelf of 50,000 sq. km, is an important state of IOR. From the South, it is connected to the Arabian Sea, which lies next to the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz. Thus Pakistan is a natural connecting point between the energy-rich Gulf States, the energy-deficient India, Central Asia Republics and China ([Fareed, 2020](#)). Almost 97% of Pakistan's trade flows through the Arabian Sea. Thus

security of its SLOCs is one of its major objectives ([Siddiqui, 2019](#)). Pakistan Maritime Doctrine of 2018 mentioned the "north Arabian Sea" as the primary area of its concern which is an important transit point for energy supplies (Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan: Preserving the freedom of Sea, 2018). Historically, Pakistan enjoys good relations with the energy-rich states of the Arabian Gulf. Preserving its traditional standing in the region and enhancing its relations with the mentioned states is another priority area of Pakistan's Indian Ocean policy. Since India and Pakistan have a long history of wars and violent conflicts and Indian Navy remained involved in offensive operations like that in 1971 and the most recent after the Balakot incident of 2019. Thus, defence of its coastline and territorial waters against any external threat, especially from India, is the foremost national policy objective of Pakistan ([Rakistics, 2013](#))

## **India and Pakistan Strategies for Gaining National Interests**

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### **India's Strategies in South Asia**

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In order to strengthen its position in IOR, India is not only building strong naval capabilities but also seeking to develop friendly relations with neighbouring countries.

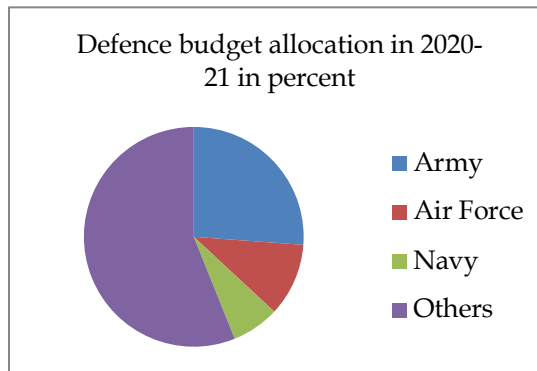
India's Prime Minister Modi, after securing power in 2014, acknowledged the importance of neighbouring countries and adopted a new strategy to engage more actively with the regional states to secure its interest ([Singh, 2021](#)). Modi's decision to invite all the regional state leaders to his swearing ceremony was an unprecedented move, which also set a tone for New have200 Delhi's 'Neighborhood First' policy ([Swami, 2014](#)). To enhance its role in IOR, India is working on its naval buildup up to significantly increase its operational capacity. For this, India is planning to naval

ships, 3 aircraft carriers, 500 aircraft and 24 submarines. While, currently India has around 132 ships, 220 aircraft and 15 Submarines (Chand, 2020).

In 2016, through the success of the Intermediate-Range Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (K-4), India initiated nuclearising IOR. It is likely to contribute to

its existing ballistic missile submarine 'Arihant' capabilities (Panda, 2016). But there is a clear mismatch between India's actual spending on its naval force and its ambitions for modernisation. For instance, in the 2020-21 defence budget allocation, the Indian Navy remains the third stakeholder getting 15 per cent of the total (Bhatnagar, 2021).

Figure 1:



Source: [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/80600625.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/80600625.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

After securing power for the second time in 2019, India's Premiership decision to visit Sri Lanka and the Maldives as his destination for his first official visit shows Modi's foreign policy priorities. India is also trying to strengthen its relations with the Maldives under the current leadership of President Ibrahim Solih, which almost broke down in former President Abdulla Yameen's government, which adopted pro-China policies. As a net security provider, India is facilitating Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, the three important littoral states of IO, against terrorist activities in the region and jointly working against common maritime challenges. In this regard, India's decision to provide *Dornier Maritime Surveillance Aircraft* to the Maldives in 2020 was a significant step which not only enhances Male security capabilities but also makes it able to monitor all foreign navies' movements in IOR (Bhatnagar, 2021).

To enhance maritime cooperation, a *Trilateral Maritime Security Initiative* was launched in 2011 by India, Maldives and Sri Lanka (Ghosh, 2014). This cooperation was halted due to the change of government in the Maldives but was again revived in November 2020 after a gap of six years. Bangladesh, Mauritius and Seychelles also participated as observer states which are quite significant for India to develop and strengthen robust strategic relations with almost all South Asian littorals (Gosh, 2020). This initiative is significant for a number of reasons; firstly, it allows New Delhi to continue its role as a security provider in South Asia to patrol and safeguard its EEZs. Secondly, through this cooperation Indian Navy is being informed about what is happening in the region, so keep an eye on any adverse developments in its neighbourhood. Through such initiatives,



India is positioning itself as a regional security provider state. ([The Wire, 2020](#))

Securing strong ties with Sri Lanka and the Maldives is essential for India's interest in IO because China is actively building infrastructure in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and both of them are now part of China's BRI ([Singh, 2019](#)). Therefore, New Delhi has joined hands with Tokyo for the development of the main container terminal of Colombo Port ([Borah, 2019](#)). India's exchange of visits and recent economic initiatives to provide USD400 million to Sri Lanka under SAARC currency swap provision in time of pandemic is another timely move by the Indian side to further strengthen its place. Bangladesh, which is also an important state in the Indian Ocean, have a cordial relationship with India ([Mitra, 2020](#)).

India is also cooperating with Bangladesh in different sectors such as energy, connectivity and anti-terrorism. A major development in mutual ties is seen after Bangladesh's announcement to terminate Sonadia, a deep sea port project in which China was interested in [investing \(Times of India, 2016\)](#). Apparently, Bangladesh gave environmental concern and initiation another deep sea port with Japan's assistance as a reason for backing off from this proposed deep sea port. But according to some analysts, Bangladesh was pressurised by India and other foreign states to contain Chinese presence in IOR, because Sonadia is located quite near to India ([Shepard, 2016](#)) and New Delhi consider it as a part of Chinese String of Pearl Strategy.

Indian navy is also engaged in different bilateral and multilateral naval exercises in Indian Ocean. MILAN, a naval exercise, was hosted by the Indian Navy in 2019, attended by 17 foreign delegates. The edition of the exercise 2020 has been postponed in the wake of pandemic but is expected to be the largest naval exercise, with the projected

participation of 30 foreign navies ([Economic Times, 2020](#))

### India's Strategies in Arabian Gulf

Traditionally, India's relations with Arabian Gulf states were dominated only by energy collaboration but recent years have experienced a change. Today, India is working to expand its relations with the Gulf States at different levels such as energy, economy, maritime and defence. Importance of this region is evident from the fact that it is the pivot to India's policy of *Extended Neighborhood*. Through increased collaboration with regional states India is aimed at increasing its influence in the entire area ([Kumar, 2016](#)). For this reason, India is continuously engaging with regional states. For Instance, India has a strategic partnership with Oman, Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia and also has defence cooperation with Qatar ([Chaudhury, 2018](#)). Bilateral investment added a new dimension in Indi-Gulf relations. An importee example in this direction was 2018 agreement between Delhi, the national oilcompany of Abu Dhabi and Saudi Aramco, for the development large oil refineries namely; Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited in Maharashtra ([Dawn, 2019](#)).

India is also engaging regional states through naval and defence cooperation, including bilateral or multilateral naval exercises and signing of different MoUs. Similarly, India military and naval academies are providing trainings to the armed forces of regional countries. India is also collaborating with these states on multilateral forums. Like all Gulf countries are member of *Indian Ocean Naval Symposium* (IONS). Additionally, India is also actively participating in joint anti-piracy patrols to create stability and security in the region. ([Thakker, 2018](#))

Another significant milestone was achieved in 2018, when India gained basing

facility at Duqm port in Oman. The port will provide logistic and repair facilities to Indian Naval ships, which is Indian Ocean's largest and strategically located deep seaport. India's naval presence at Duqm is strategically significant for two reasons. Firstly, it will allow New Delhi to increase its naval presence in the IOR. Secondly, it will give it an edge to counter the growing Chinese naval influence in the [region \(Roy, 2018\)](#)

India's continuing outreach to Arabian Gulf is further evident from the recent exchange of the high-level visit. In Dec 2020, Foreign Minister of India Jaishankar visited Bahrain, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait ([Gupta, 2020](#)) and his deputy V Muraleedharan later went to Oman (Muraleedharan, 2020). During his visit, Foreign Minister focused on deepening relations with the Gulf region and protecting the interest of the Indian diaspora in times of pandemic. Furthermore, India also provided medical assistance to Gulf countries under their 'extended neighbourhood' policy, which the Gulf States later reciprocated. As part of New Delhi military diplomacy, for the first time, Indian Army Chief General MM Naravane visited UAE and Saudi Arabia in Dec 2020 to further boost the existing mutual cooperation ([Kuchay, 2020](#))

### Pakistan Strategies in South Asia

As India and Pakistan share historical enmity, which always cast a dark shadow on the view of peace and stability in the South Asian region. India's diplomatic approach towards South Asian states is basically creating challenges for Pakistani interest in the region. The growing Indian presence in South Asia is pushing Pakistan into isolation from the rest of the regional states. Pakistan naval force also started independent maritime security patrols to safeguard national and international trade shipments and counter piracy in an area of 290,000 sq miles. ([Khalid, 2018](#))

In order to strengthen bilateral relations, Imran Khan (Pakistan's PM, 2018-April 22) tried to engage with regional countries. In this regard, the virtual interaction of Dec 2020 by Imran Khan with Bangladeshi counterpart Hasina Wajed showed the willingness of both sides to improve bilateral ties and build confidence. Pakistan's High Commissioner to Bangladesh also met with Prime Minister Hasina to enhance trust, which seems to be a positive development in an otherwise cold relationship (Baqir, 2022). Official level visits by Pakistani leadership to the Maldives in 2017 by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GOP, 2017](#)) and then later in 2018 by Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa were also an attempt to boost existing bilateral interaction. ([Maldives Independent, 2018](#))

In 2018, Pakistan was invited by the Maldives National Defence Force Chief Major General Ahmed Shiyam for a discussion on the possibility of joining the patrol of the vast EEZ of IO. In 2018, Pakistan's Naval Chief Zafar Mahmood Abbasi called on the Maldives to enhance defence and naval collaboration ([Pakistan Today, 2018](#)). As both the states are the important littoral state of the Indian Ocean and face common maritime challenges. Pakistan is also providing assistance and training to Sri Lankan military personnel. Additionally, the Sri Lankan navy is actively participating in Pakistan's initiated naval exercises. In 2017, Pakistani naval ships participated in exercises conducted by Sri Lankan warships to increase interoperability and operational coordination between the two navies ([Dawn, 2017](#)). Later on, in Feb 2019, Pakistan hosted a multilateral naval exercise (AMAN 2019) with the aim of further promoting cooperation at the regional and extra-regional levels. Forty-four states (including Sri Lanka and the Maldives) have joined this exercise (Zafeer, 2017). From February 11 to 16, 2021, again Pakistan navy conducted a

multinational naval exercise named *AMAN 2021*, with the aim to improve interoperability between regional and extra-regional naval forces for countering non-traditional security threats and attaining peace in the IOR ([Jaspal, 2021](#)). South Asian states such as Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh were also part of this exercise which sends a strong message to New Delhi that Islamabad is not an isolated nation but a willing partner with other countries. (Multinational military drill to give Pakistan diplomatic push, 2021)

### **Pakistan Strategies in Arabian Gulf**

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The Gulf region holds a central position in Pakistan's foreign policy. Since its independence, Pakistan has been enjoying close relations with the Gulf States and is also economically reliant on them. Pakistan's strong relations with the regional countries are important mainly for two reasons; firstly, for imports of natural resources, and secondly, a large number of Pakistani diaspora is settled in this region. But in recent years, Pakistan's relations with the Gulf have witnessed a downward trajectory because of changing geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, India's growing economic and strategic presence in the region is also deteriorating the relations between Pakistan and Arabian Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates ([Singh, 2020](#)). The Gulf States have always supported the Pakistani stance over the Indian Occupied Kashmir. But their reaction to the abrogation of article 370 in August 2019 was a real disappointment for Pakistan. Mostly Arab world gave muted response or had a pro-Indian attitude over this issue ([Roy, 2000](#)). Additionally, Pakistan remained unsuccessful in organising an OIC meeting to discuss the Kashmir issue because of reluctance by some member states (Economic Times, 2020)

Presently, Pakistani leadership is trying to regain its traditional position in the Gulf

region. For instance, the number of highest-level visits that have taken place to and from the Arabian Gulf considers an attempt to improve the trustworthy relationship with regional states ([Dawn, 2019](#)).

For the enhancements of relations, the naval and economic cooperation, including bilateral naval exercises, Pakistan Naval ships visits and a recent MoU with Oman for joint collaboration in the defence sector, is also an effort to secure Pakistan's interest in the region. During the ongoing crucial time of the pandemic, Pakistan also gave medical assistance to Kuwait to help fight the COVID-19 (Arab News, 2020). Such goodwill visits and medical assistance will provide opportunities for engagement and common grounds for collaboration. However, the changing attitude of regional states and the growing Indian presence in the region undermine Pakistan's economic and security interests and limit its foreign policy options. There is a need from the Pakistani side to resolve their differences diplomatically with the Gulf States.

### **Strategic Collaboration in the Indian Ocean**

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#### **China-Pakistan Strategic Cooperation**

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China and Pakistan, as 'all strategic weather partners,' have had antiquity of magnificent relationship. Both states have been able to establish multidimensional relations and the best example of pacific coexistence in spite of different political, social and economic structures. Pakistan recognised China in 1950, and after that, both sides tried to maintain reliable relations. China and Pakistan are working to increase their strategic cooperation in the economy, energy, defence and technology sectors. China is Pakistan's second largest trading partner ([Sattar, 2007](#)).

Chinese BRI and CPEC further expanded their mutual strategic partnership. The bilateral collaboration is



grounded in common security and strategic concerns or interests. Once this project is completed, Beijing via Gwadar port will have easy and safe access to the resourceful regions of the Middle East and Africa. In this regard, China is developing infrastructure to connect Gwadar to its province Xinjiang through roads and railway lines. Geographically, Gwadar port is close to the strategically significant energy checkpoint, *the Strait of Hormuz*, a gateway for almost 30% of the world's oil shipments ([Fazil, 2015](#)).

In order to secure its SLOCs, China is gradually enhancing its maritime relations with almost all the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. The Sino-Pak naval cooperation has significantly increased over the past decades. In Oct 2005, a USD 600 million deal was signed between Islamabad and Beijing for the construction of four F22P frigates for Pakistan's navy (PN) with Transfer of Technology ([Safdar, 2016](#)). All are now part of the PN fleet. In 2012 Chinese company again secured an order from Pakistan Navy for four additional improved variants of the F-22P Zulfiqar class frigates ([Zulfiqar-Class \(F-22P\) Frigate, 2020](#)). However, the most important development in strategic cooperation was the 2016 deal for the acquisition of 8 Chinese Yuan class type 041 diesel submarines by 2028. This deal is aimed at addressing the prevailing imbalance between Pakistan and India ([Baker, 2015](#)).

In 2018, a milestone agreement was signed between the two powers, under which recently Islamabad received a Chinese naval Type 054A-based frigate, and by 2021, three more would be delivered ([Gandy, 2020](#)). The frigate will further increase Pakistan's combat power and operational capabilities. Additionally, in January 2020, both the states conducted a joint exercise titled '*Sea Guardians 2020*' to further enhance their "all-weather strategic

partnership" and build a secure maritime environment ([Emer, 2020](#))

## Indo-US Strategic Cooperation

India gained independence on the eve of the Cold War, but it has intelligently avoided joining any group (East/West) formally. On the other hand, Pakistan, due to its security, economic and political instability, joined the western block. However, Pakistan and USA have been allies since the 1950s but lack a commonality of interest. Despite having multilateral and bi-lateral defence agreements, America has not allowed Pakistan to use weapons against India since 1965. American claim was that it had provided weapons to Pakistan to contain communism and not for any other purpose ([Khan, 2018](#)). It was clear in the 1960s that despite India's tilt towards USSR, India was considered an important strategic asset for the USA. In the post-Cold War era, strategic relations between the two began expanding. In First Gulf War, India aided America by providing refuelling facilities to various naval ships during operation Desert Storm ([Ali, 2016](#)). Thus strategic partnership between the two started soon after the emergence of America as the sole superpower, but this cooperation was somewhat slow.

Bilateral relations got intensified during Bush Junior's tenure, with the signing of the Indo-US Civil Nuclear deal in 2008 ([Bajoria & Pan, 2010](#)). Relations continued to develop with the same zeal during the tenure of President Barak Obama. In 2010, Obama paid an official visit to India. During this visit number of agreements were signed, and India was pronounced as the most important strategic partner of America. In 2015 America and India gave a "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean". Following are the core aspects of this policy initiative:

- i. The rise of China is a mutual security threat for both. America views Chinese initiatives through its BRI as

threatening to its global and regional position. India regards these moves as an attempt to establish a strong foothold in IO, which is always regarded as its area of influence by the Indian government.

- ii. Both sides want to ensure their freedom of navigation and secure their Sea Lines of Communication throughout the Indo-Pacific region.
- iii. The document highlighted the need for multilateral cooperation via infrastructure development, pipelines and joint exercises etc. as important means for gaining the above-mentioned objectives (The White House: Office of Press Secretary, 2015)

In 2016 "Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Understanding Agreement" (LEMOA) was signed. Through this, both sides reached an understanding that they could utilise each other military and naval bases anywhere in the world for the diversified type of activities like refuelling, joint military exercises, port calls, humanitarian operations and mutually agreed to military activities. For a better understanding of this agreement, it is very important to locate naval and military bases of both in the

Arabian Gulf and the South Asian part of the Indian Ocean. Currently, the US has access to Khalifa Bin Salman Port, Shaikh Isa Air Base, Muharraq Air Base of Bahrain, Ali Al Salem Air Base, Camp Arifjan, Camp Buehring and Caml Patriot of Kuwait, RAFO Masirah, Muscat International Air Port, AL-Musannah Air Base, Port of Duqm and Port of Salahlah of Oman (the US don't have a physical presence in Oman. Rather agreement assures that Omani government will allow access to these facilities ince requested by America). In Qatar, the US enjoys access to Al Udeid Air Base and Camp as Sayliyah. In UAE, America has Al Dhafara Air Base, Port of Jebel Ali and Fujairah Naval Base. While in Saudi Arabia, it is permitted to use EskanVillage ([Wallin, nd](http://Wallin.nd)).

India is a huge state of the Indian Ocean; physically, it occupies many parts of the ocean. It is home to a large number of major, intermediate and small ports in the ocean. Its naval bases are not only confined to its territorial waters. Rather it has bases on the strategically located islands under its jurisdiction. Indian naval basing facilities are aptly highlighted in the following figure.

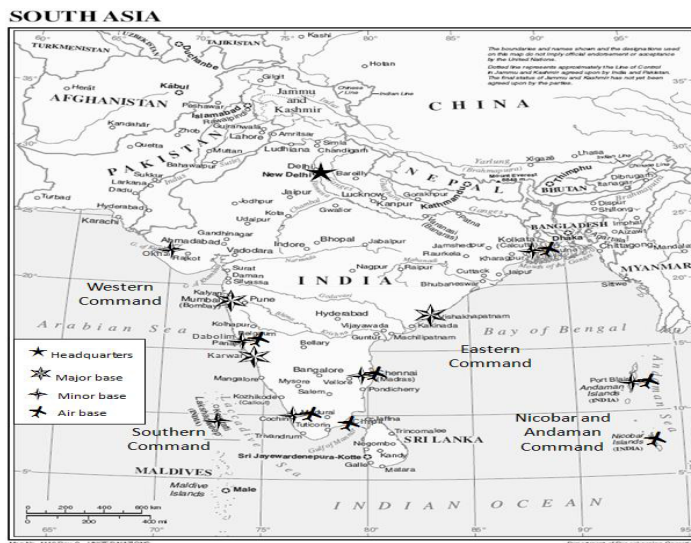


Figure 2:

Source: Humberto Santos Rocha. *Naval Power in India's Geopolitics*. Revista Militar. 2013  
<https://www.revistamilitar.pt/artigo/798>

In 2017 Prime Minister Nirandena Modi visited the United States in which both leaders agreed to further enhance their defence, security and economic cooperation. In 2018 "Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement" was signed through which both sides concurred on information sharing, and India will get access to advanced technology and equipment. In February 2020, President Donald Trump paid an official visit to India, and an agreement for boosting intelligence sharing was reached in October 2020 (Council of Foreign Relations, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

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Evolving geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean gave rise to a complex and interesting chain of conflict and cooperation. Different regional and extra-regional forces are aggressively engaged in cooperating with each other to counter perceived adverse grouping. A clear example of this strategic manoeuvring is Indo-US and China-Pakistan nexus. All these states are struggling to gain their vested interests. But

the policy initiatives discussed earlier are evident in the fact that competing forces are pursuing a zero-sum game. Whereas, the contemporary globalised international system and universal interests in the safety and security of maritime trade and traffic require major powers to chase common interests. America and China being major global powers and Pakistan and India being important regional players, must work out viable solutions for their differences and concentrate their efforts toward the welfare and development of humanity.

Further, it can be said that of all the focused states (America, China, India and Pakistan), Pakistan is comparatively weak as independent foreign policy initiatives are concerned. Arabian Gulf and South Asian littorals are included in its immediate areas of interest. But its maritime doctrine was documented in 2018, and maritime strategy is still missing. And its foreign policy is also limited to defence and naval cooperation. There is a need on the Pakistani side to reevaluate its approach toward Indian Ocean Region.

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