

Sino-Indian Power Competition in the Indian Ocean: A New Realpolitik Outlook

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In 1989, the Berlin Wall, which divided Europe into two fell in the hands of freedom-seeking Germans, and West and East Germany reunited again and solidarity prevailed. Consequently, the Communist flag bearer Soviet Union collapsed with its immense military power vis-à-vis domestic socio-economic and political crises. The end of the Cold War led the contemporary "Western King"- the United States of America- to achieve global hegemon status with unilateral power control capacity in the international system. The First Gulf War (1990), Afghan (2001) and Iraq War (2003), and Syrian (2011) and Libyan (2011) Civil Wars are some instances of the US unilateral power exercise exposure in the international system (Charny, 2003).

In the meantime, rapid economic growth of several countries entitled them for power proliferation nationally and beyond. Regional military giants like Russia and emerging economic powers like Australia, Brazil, China, India, Japan, South Africa, Turkey, etc. challenge the unilateral nature of the international

political system. Therefore, such massive economic output of China, the most economic emerging country of the present era, support to initiating Chinese global dream Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. According to experts, BRI is a model initiated under Chinese President Xi Jing Ping's leadership that focus not only on the economic connectivity of China to the rest of the world, but also on extending geopolitical and geostrategic objectives of China.

BRI is a project that leads China beyond its national borders and undertakes a massive militarization presence there, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. But India from the Indian Ocean (IO) and the USA, Japan, and Australia from the Pacific Ocean are considered such rapid militarization of China a serious challenge to their political and strategic ambitions in the region. Thus, the US unilateral power exposure capacity is in a transition period to shift to multilateralism. In academia, it is called paradigm shift of world order from unilateralism to multilateralism.

Indian Ocean, which will be the epicenter of the 21st century world politics, discussed in details by the US strategist Robert D. Kaplan in his famous book title, "Monsoon: Indian Ocean and The Future of American Power" (Kaplan, 2010). At the outset of the 21st century, Kaplan's prediction seemed very obvious, particularly in the context of the Sino-Indian *realpolitik* rivalry in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), captured global attention.

Apart from the 20th century's global geopolitical history, particularly from the Cold War context, the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean has been historic. Connectivity, commerce, warfare, livelihood, etc., are some historic reasons that make IOR the most important waterline in world geopolitical history (Pabasara Kannangara, 2018). The commencement of modern science extends the prospect of the IOR. It fosters and broadens the capacity of exploration as well as exploitation of ample natural (living and non-living) resources in IO, easing energy and trade transportation, and the navigation via the IO safely.

Maritime traditional (political, strategic, military) and transnational security challenges (maritime terrorism and organized crimes, IUU fishing and illegal trespassing, climate change, trafficking and piracy, etc.) are taking over the Indian Ocean immense possibilities. To be specific within the two types of threats, the geopolitical and geostrategic competition among global powers roaming around the IO is regarded as the major challenges to IO security domain. Additionally, the power struggle between major powers is also threatened the security dimension of IOR smaller states. Moreover, the challenge has largely influenced the process of foreign policy formulation and implementation of these smaller states concerning maritime security establishment.

However, the Sino-Indian power competition in the 21st century has become obvious more than ever. The rivalry aggravated upon some land based crises regarding territorial integrity and maintaining sovereignty over these territories, including, Ladakh, Tibet, Doklam, Sikkim, etc. The two neighboring powers compete for maintaining sovereignty over the aforementioned lands. These territorial crises have instigated IO maritime security domain. According to some Indian decision-makers, Chinese rapid military establishment in the IOR and Chinese strategic and economic development projects there particularly BRI, is considered a major challenge to Indian national interest and security domain.

From India's end, Chinese rapid militarization in the IOR is threatening regional peace and stability, mutual consensus on security and prosperity, and the prospect of collaboration and partnership. Therefore, to exert India itself as a major (or the biggest, according to Indian security analysts) player in the IOR, India needs active and powerful participation in the power competition. Thus, considering the Sino-Indian geopolitical and geostrategic rivalry in the IOR, a new *realpolitik* context is prevailing.

For sustaining Chinese economic dominance, in 2013 China introduced its global dream, "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)." BRI extends the opportunities for China to engage globally with

its dream project. Many countries from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and South America have already had membership of BRI, and some others are showing their interest in joining it.

"String of Pearls" is regarded as an important part of the BRI model. Scholars identify "String of Pearls" as a vital strategic instrument for China for successfully implementing BRI, and this project has initiated mostly focusing on the IO. Moreover, implementing the "String of Pearls" is necessary to China for grasping the geographic as well as demographic significance of the IOR and its potential market opportunities. Reaching to that goal, China in recent times been cooperating with IOR smaller states economically and is working on translating this economic partnership into a strategic partnership. To smaller states in the region, China is now their major economic and development partner, and they wish to extend it to strategic levels.

For China, IO is essential for its trade as well as energy transportation and commercial vessels navigation. In that consideration, security threats in the IO maritime domain are deeply concerning for China. Some experts held that for countering such security challenges to its trade and energy supply chains, Chinese strong military manifestation in the IO is increasingly visible (White, 2020).

On the other hand, experts refer that one of the major plans for China under the BRI project is to connect mainland China with IO via Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand (Mudunuri, 2020). It will decrease Chinese dependency on the Malaccan Strait. The tendency is called the Malacca dilemma for China. Therefore, for executing this plan, China has already signed some MoUs with IOR littoral states, proposed for developing ports, submarine canyons, and other necessary infrastructure development projects.

However, India contemplates IO as an integral part of its security and progress. India's external policy puts emphasis on the IO, particularly since the later half of the 20th century to the 21st century. In *realpolitik* consideration, usually, India describes such Chinese rapid economic emergence and military presence in the IO as a threat to India's national and regional political ambitions. In containing Chinese influence over the region, India is working in three ways (Bhatt, 2024): strengthening India's military power to counter maritime security challenges in the IOR; focusing on broader regional partnership building and exploiting the scope available in the IOR; and strengthening the regional capacity building and local defense system as regard to powerful entrance in the IO.

Looking ahead to these goals, India allocates a substantial amount of its annual defence budget (Voices, 2022) to strengthen Indian naval forces. Moreover, India's indigenously made naval aircraft carriers, destroyers, and other war ships, and established naval bases, for example, in the Lakshadweep INS Jatayu and in Mauritius INS Kadamba are facilitating Indian naval forces to effectively engage and manage the IOR security (Bhatt, 2024).

Moreover to securitize the IO maritime domain, India signifies the role of nontraditional security challenges dominant in the IO. These challenges are transnational by nature and, therefore, cannot be alleviated through a singular state. Thus, India sought a unified approach, collaborating with other countries in the IOR and beyond. Joint naval exercise is an effective instrument that India emphasizes more to counter such transnational challenges. MALABAR, MILAN, ASEAN INDIA are some regular naval exercises that India leads the show. Moreover, India participates in joint naval exercise with Australia, Britain, France, and the USA. These naval practices have significantly empowered India to maintain security prospects in the maritime domain of IO.

According to some security specialists, concurrently India extends its diplomatic position to exhibit itself as a major security provider in the IOR (Mishra, 2024), and the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) have acknowledged that claim. Because the IPS needs India in the IOR to steer the strategy to contain Chinese gradual dominance in the Indo-Pacific maritime sphere. In consideration of the ongoing Sino-Indian rivalry in the IOR, the US-led IPS as well as AUKUS is sought to strengthen India with all necessary means to advance Indian role in this geopolitical and geostrategic game. The QUAD 2.0 (2017), a security umbrella that can facilitate and become a bridge among AUKUS (2021), IPS (2022), and Indian interests in the region in the years to come. The balancing of Chinese military influence in the Indo-Pacific has become necessary for those major powers in the region to attain their varied political ambitions.

Therefore, the Sino-Indian rivalry is not limited to land borders; rather, it spreads the IOR maritime domain. Experts said that the inclusion of other regional stakeholders, who are concerned about Chinese power projection over the IOR, into the ongoing Sino-Indian rivalry will perplex the geopolitical and geostrategic equation of the region (Bhatt, 2024). Thus, a new realpolitik outlook will emerge in the IOR, broadly in the Indo-Pacific region.

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