The Militarization Of The Indian Ocean: Naval Build-Ups And Strategic Bases

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean is witnessing a significant rise in militarization as both regional and global powers intensify their strategic engagement in the area. China's "String of Pearls" initiative, India's expanding maritime capabilities, and the United States' efforts to uphold freedom of navigation reflect broader geopolitical ambitions. The establishment of military facilities in locations such as Djibouti, the Seychelles, and the Maldives underscores the strategic importance of the region. This study investigates the underlying motivations driving these developments and assesses their potential impact on regional order. However, it remains uncertain—does this escalating military footprint signal enhanced security or a looming contest for dominance?

Key Words- Indian Ocean, Militarization, Naval power

Introduction

The Indian Ocean has grown more military in recent decades, despite being an important maritime route. The Indian Ocean's strategic importance has grown due to its role in global energy transportation, with over 80% of the world's oil traffic passing through. As a result, regional and global powers have increased their naval presence and military facilities, leading to rising militarization. This shift has drawn major actors like China, India, and the United States into strategic competition.

China's "String of Pearls" strategy exemplifies this trend, as Beijing has developed a network of ports and bases from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa. These facilities not only enhance China's maritime security but also enable power projection and economic outreach well beyond its borders[1]. In response, India has advanced its naval capabilities and forged security partnerships with the United States, and Australia and Japan to maintain its influence in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, the U.S. maintains strong military infrastructure, particularly in Diego Garcia, supporting counterterrorism, surveillance, and rapid deployment operations[2].

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[1] Amit, R. (2019). China's "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean. Journal of Geopolitics, 12(4), 56-75

[2] Kaplan, R. D. (2010). Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power. Random House.

Beyond these superpowers, regional players like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates are also extending their military capabilities, which adds to the security environment's complexity and competition. Concerns about protecting sea lanes, stopping piracy, and dealing with terrorism and other non-state threats are the main causes of the militarization. The Indian Ocean is becoming a region of both collaboration and competition as a result of this growing geopolitical interest.

This study explores the motivations, strategic investments, and implications of this militarization, aiming to understand its impact on regional balance, economic stability, and the prospects for peace or conflict in one of the world's most strategically significant maritime spaces.

Literature review

The Indian Ocean's militarization has emerged as a major area of study in modern geopolitics, with a growing emphasis on the area's significance for both economic stability and international security. Scholars like Brewster (2014) and Kaplan (2010) have highlighted the Indian Ocean's strategic importance, especially because of its crucial sea lanes that transport a sizable amount of the world's energy commerce. Much attention has been paid to China's "String of Pearls" strategy (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008), which highlights its attempts to build a network of marine outposts that stretch from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa and raises questions about changes in regional dominance.

India's maritime doctrine and naval modernization are also extensively discussed, with authors like Scott (2012) noting India's ambition to be the Indo-Pacific's security provider. In the meantime, it is believed that the United States' ongoing naval presence serves as a counterbalance to preserve freedom of navigation (Till, 2018). It is investigated how competitive strategic positioning is reflected in the construction of military outposts in key areas like Djibouti, the Maldives, and the Seychelles. Whether these trends improve regional security or run the danger of intensifying rivalries is up for debate in the literature right now. The long-term effects of this militarization trend, however, require further empirical research.

Historical Background and the Indian Ocean's Geopolitical Significance

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world. It extends from the Arabian Peninsula in the north to the southernmost point of India, and from the coasts of East Africa to Australia's western beaches. The Indian Ocean has always been a vital area for trade, culture, and military strategy due to its geographic centrality

1.1 Historical Overview: Colonial and Post-Colonial Influence

The ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Indus Valley civilizations recognized the Indian Ocean's strategic value early on. Over time, it became a central hub for East-West maritime trade, led by seafaring cultures from Southeast Asia, India, and the Arabian Peninsula. Dominant powers in this network included the Chola Dynasty, Abbasid Caliphate, and Srivijaya Empire.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, European colonial powers transformed the geopolitical geography of the Indian Ocean with the goal of controlling the sea lanes leading to India and Southeast Asia. The British East India Company secured India and adjacent maritime passages, while the Portuguese built bases and forts, establishing Britain as the dominating power by the 19th century. British naval installations, such as those in Singapore and Mauritius, strengthened this authority. The Suez Canal's construction in 1869 greatly enhanced the Indian Ocean's importance as a crucial commerce route.

The region's power dynamics changed during the period of decolonization in the middle of the 20th century. Regional powers started to exert themselves once former colonies in the Indian Ocean acquired their independence. India, in particular, became a major naval and military force in the area[3]. Nonetheless, the effects of colonialism, especially the British dominance of naval bases, persisted in influencing post-colonial regimes' strategic planning. The US, during the Cold War, also recognized the region's strategic significance and worked to keep its presence in order to offset the Soviet Union's influence, especially in the Middle East and Africa.

1.2 Geopolitical Significance: Control of Strategic Maritime Chokepoints

The Indian Ocean's major maritime chokepoints—tight passageways essential to international trade—remain a major factor in its continued geopolitical significance. Major chokepoints include the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb which are essential for moving gas and oil to East Asia from the Middle East.

The **Strait of Hormuz**, located between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, is perhaps the most critical choke point in the region.This narrow waterway is a key location for global energy security because it transports about 20% of the world's oil[4]. Since tensions between Iran, the United States, and other Middle Eastern nations have remained high over the years, control of this passage has long been a strategic concern for both regional and international countries.

The **Bab-el-Mandeb Strait**, which separates the Arabian Sea from the Red Sea, is essential for trade between the Mediterranean, Asia, and Europe. The Strait of Malacca facilitates the flow of gas, oil, and freight between East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe by connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific and the South China Sea. East of Malacca, the Lombok Strait is essential for regional trade between Australia and Southeast Asia.

Control over these chokepoints is crucial for gaining control in regional geopolitics as well as for protecting economic networks.

1.3 The Emergence of Superpower Rivalries and the Cold War

The militarization of the Indian Ocean took on a new dimension during the Cold War. As both superpowers looked to increase their influence in a crucial theatre of the global geopolitical conflict, the area became the focus of competition between the US and the USSR at this time. To offset one other's influence, the US and the USSR attempted to build alliances, military installations, and naval bases across the Indian Ocean[5].

The establishment of the American naval base on the Indian Ocean island of- **Diego Garcia** in 1971 was one of the most important developments of the Cold War. As a staging area for air and naval operations during the Gulf War and other regional conflicts, Diego Garcia emerged as a crucial strategic outpost for U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Asia[6]. The Soviet Union made defence agreements, including naval cooperation and technology transfers, with regional countries like India in an effort to forge alliances with them at the same time[7].

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[3] Raghavan, S. (2011). The Indian Ocean: Naval Power and The Strategic Context. Naval Institute Press.

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[6] Hughes, P. (2010). The United States and the Indian Ocean: A Military Presence in the Indian Ocean Basin. Georgetown University Press.

[7] Chakma, B. (2001). India's Nuclear Policy: The Impact of the Cold War and Post-Cold War Era. Routledge.

Both regional and superpowers employed military buildups and strategic placement to project influence and deter opponents in the Indian Ocean, which turned into a theater of proxy wars. U.S. efforts to maintain its supremacy, especially through its alliances with nations like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, thwarted the Soviet Union's desire to build a naval presence in the area.

1.4 Post-Cold War Era: Emerging Powers and New Dynamics

The Indian Ocean became increasingly multipolar with the end of Cold War and the Soviet Union's collapse, as new regional countries like China, Iran, and India asserted their dominance. With its base in Diego Garcia and other key areas in the area, the United States was able to maintain its military presence, but it also had to deal with new difficulties in balancing the conflicting interests of these new countries[8].

For instance, China sees the Indian Ocean as crucial to protecting its oil supply routes, which is why it has increased its naval presence there in recent decades. China's larger goal to increase its influence in the region includes the String of Pearls plan, which entails securing access to ports and naval bases from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea[9]. In contrast, India has made an effort to become the Indian Ocean's leading naval force. India has extended its naval infrastructure along its eastern and western shores, upgraded its fleet, and raised the defence budget. India's aim to protect its maritime interests in the area is demonstrated by the construction of Indian naval stations in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as well as negotiations with nations like the Maldives and Seychelles.

1.5 Legacy and the Future of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean's economic riches, strategic chokepoints, and important trading routes make it an essential geopolitical zone. Global and regional countries continue to create bases and increase their naval forces in response to the military legacies of the Cold War and colonialism. The strategic importance of the region will only increase as long as the United States is present and nations like China and India continue to exert influence. To analyze current militarization, changing alliances, and changing security problems, one must have a thorough understanding of its past.

2. Contemporary Naval Build-ups and Strategic Bases

The Indian Ocean's growing geopolitical and military significance has led global and regional powers to increase their military presence. Key factors include its economic value, control over chokepoints, and the US-China-India rivalry. Below are the role of strategic bases, naval expansions, and their broader security implications.

2.1 Naval Build-ups and Major Players in the Indian Ocean

Major nations like the United States, China, and India, as well as others like Saudi Arabia, France, and Iran, are developing their capabilities and strategic interests, which is changing the naval dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

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[8] Harris, S. (2013). The Indian Ocean: A Maritime History. Cambridge University Press.

[9] Medcalf, R. (2013). China's "String of Pearls" Strategy in the Indian Ocean: Implications for India and the United States. Asian Survey, 53(4), 666-687.

The United States

The United States has long kept a significant naval presence in the Indian Ocean as part of its larger Indo-Pacific strategy. **Diego Garcia**, a naval post in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), is the most significant U.S. military facility in the area. An important hub for American operations in the Asia-Pacific area, Central Asia, and the Middle East is this base. Strategically situated to monitor vital maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Diego Garcia has been used as a base for operations by the U.S. military, such as airstrikes in Iraq and Afghanistan[10].The U.S. has military agreements with regional nations like the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman, along with Diego Garcia, enabling frequent naval deployments. The U.S. Navy's Japan based 7th Fleet, regularly patrols the Indian Ocean to reassure allies and demonstrate power in key areas like the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Malacca.

China

China's growing geopolitical ambitions have rapidly increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Central to this is the "String of Pearls" strategy—a network of ports and bases from China to Africa—aimed at securing trade routes, energy supplies, and control over key maritime chokepoints.

China's 2017 establishment of a **base in Djibouti** is among the most important recent milestones in its naval expansion. Djibouti is a crucial position in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a chokepoint through which a large portion of global traffic travels, and the entry to the Red Sea. As China's first military base overseas, the base in Djibouti is a major step in the country's aspirations to strengthen its naval capabilities and establish its dominance in the Indian Ocean[11]. It acts as a center for military operations, logistics, and information collection in an area that is strategically and economically significant to China, particularly in relation to the Middle East and Africa.

China has developed key ports in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and notably **Gwadar Port**, in Pakistan as a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Strategically located on the Arabian Sea, Gwadar offers China direct Indian Ocean access and reduces dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy imports.
 Similarly, China has increased its influence in Sri Lanka by building the **Hambantota Port**, which was initially constructed for commercial reasons but has since raised concerns about China's expanding strategic presence in the area[12].

India

India has been actively seeking navy modernization and extending its maritime reach as the leading regional force in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy has continuously expanded the size of its fleet, integrated cutting-edge technology, and enhanced its operating capabilities. India considers the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to be its principal duty, making it a top priority for its marine strategy[13].

India is establishing new naval bases and commissioning cutting-edge aircraft carriers, submarines, and destroyers as part of its military development. India's strategic location in the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, close to the Strait of Malacca, has made it possible to oppose both Western and Chinese naval activity in the area. Additionally, India's strategic position in the Indian Ocean as well as the Indo-Pacific

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[10] Hughes, P. (2010). The United States and the Indian Ocean: A Military Presence in the Indian Ocean Basin. Georgetown University Press.

[11] Chauhan, S. (2019). China's Strategic Military Expansion in the Indian Ocean: The Role of Djibouti and Beyond. Asian Security, 15(2), 153-172.

[12] Panda, A. (2016). China's Growing Naval Footprint in the Indian Ocean: Strategic Considerations. Asian Security, 12(2), 105-121.

[13] Raghavan, S. (2011). The Indian Ocean: Naval Power and the Strategic Context. Naval Institute Press.

has been strengthened by its cooperation with nations such as the U.S., Japan, and Australia through the – QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)[14].

India has partnered with nations like the Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives as a result of its desire in expanding and gaining access to important ports in the area. Additionally, India has agreements with the Seychelles to build a naval facility on **Assomption Island** and has been in talks with Mauritius to increase its naval presence in the area. India's aim to disrupt China's growing significance and dominate the Indian Ocean, includes these actions[15].

France

Despite being geographically distant, France has maintained a strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean, mainly because of its overseas possessions in the western and central regions of the ocean, including Réunion Island and Mayotte. La Réunion is one among France's several military installations in the area. It is a vital base for French naval activities, such as intelligence collection and counter-piracy missions[16]. France may maintain a presence in the larger Indo-Pacific region and demonstrate its influence in a crucial area by deploying military forces in the Indian Ocean.

2.2 Strategic Naval Bases and Their Implications

Naval bases and ports enable power projection by securing key shipping lanes, boosting logistics, and influencing regional geopolitics. In the US-China-India rivalry, several Indian Ocean bases act as crucial strategic hubs.

Diego Garcia (U.S.)

Diego Garcia, is a key U.S. military facility situated in the central Indian Ocean. The U.S. Navy and Air Force use it as a base, and it is an important asset in U.S. operations in the Middle East and Central Asia. Because of Diego Garcia's location, the U.S. military can project force into the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and the larger Indian Ocean region. The importance of the base in preserving American dominance in the area cannot be emphasized, especially in light of China's and Russia's increasing competitiveness[17].

Djibouti (China)

The establishment of the Chinese base in Djibouti represents a critical turning point in Chinese naval strategy. The station allows China to protect its energy supply lines, support military activities in the area, and fend off any threats to its economic interests in the Middle East and Africa. Because Djibouti is situated at the meeting point of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, China can project strength into the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa, and the larger Indian Ocean while also keeping an eye on important maritime chokepoints[18].

Gwadar and Hambantota Port (Pakistan and Sri Lanka)

India and regional actors worry about China's investments in Gwadar and Hambantota. Gwadar is key for China's trade and energy security, while Hambantota, originally a commercial port, raises concerns over

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[14] Pant, H. V. (2014). India's Naval Strategy and the Western Dimension. Routledge.

[15] Brewster, D. (2016). India's Ocean: The Politics of the Indian Ocean Region. Routledge.

[16] Lasserre, F, (2017). France's Role in the Indian Ocean: Strategic Interests and Military Operations. Ocean Development and International Law, 48(4), 348-367.

[17] Hughes, P. (2010). The United States and the Indian Ocean: A Military Presence in the Indian Ocean Basin. Georgetown University Press.

[18] Chauhan, S. (2019), China's Strategic Military Expansion in the Indian Ocean: The Role of Djibouti and Beyond. Asian Security, 15(2), 153-172.

China's expanding military presence in Sri Lanka. These projects reflect China's growing regional power and its dual military-commercial strategy.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands (India)

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are an essential component of India's naval strategy. These islands, are close to the Strait of Malacca, and give India a vital location from which to keep an eye on shipping and use its naval forces. India's expanding alliance with the US, Japan, and Australia to preserve an open and free Indo-Pacific further emphasizes the region's significance.

2.3 The Shifting Balance of Power

The Indian Ocean's security environment is changing as a result of the increasing naval capabilities of both international and regional nations. Global tensions are reflected in the competition between the India, US, China, and other nations for control of vital bases and important chokepoints. Global trade, security, and regional stability will all be impacted by the building of naval bases and military buildups as China and India increase their naval capabilities and the US tries to hold onto its hegemony.

Conclusion

Global and regional power dynamics have undergone significant change, which is reflected in the increasing militarization of the Indian Ocean. Strategic rivalry have fuelled the swift development of naval capabilities and the construction of important military installations around the region, especially between India, China, and the United States. These trends are fundamentally linked to larger geopolitical agendas concerning trade security, regional influence, and the Indo-Pacific power balance; they are not only tactical.

The United States' dedication to preserving an open and free Indo-Pacific, China's "String of Pearls" strategy, and India's maritime assertiveness all demonstrate larger aspirations to secure access to vital maritime routes and have an impact on regional affairs. In addition to enhancing logistical reach, the establishment of military bases in nations like Djibouti and others increases the possibility of geopolitical rivalry and posturing.

The presence of military outposts in nations like the Maldives, the Seychelles, and Djibouti highlights the growing rivalry for control of vital shipping lanes and strategic access points. Concerns about an intensifying arms race and the possibility of mistake or confrontation are raised by these military buildups, even while they may provide improved maritime security and deterrence against unconventional threats.

Ultimately, how regional actors manage their strategic interests and participate in defense and diplomatic discussions will determine whether increasing militarization results in increased tensions or more stability. In order to prevent war and guarantee that the Indian Ocean stays a region of peace, trade, and open navigation rather than a disputed theater of confrontation, cooperative security arrangements and confidence-building initiatives will be crucial.

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