



## The Tripolar Great Game in the IOR: Competition, Cooperation or Acute Confrontation

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### Abstract:

*The domination of the seas has remained a prerequisite for acquisition of power in inter-state relations. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has long been considered a backwater to major power rivalry and global geopolitics. Despite being the smallest of the world's oceans, the commercial and economic importance of Indian Ocean is never being questioned. IOR hosts major sea routes connecting four continents, Asia, Africa, Europe, and America, and has gained significant geostrategic importance because of rising Chinese naval power and a refocus on sea lanes as an arena of both competition and cooperation. It facilitates maritime trade in the region, transports more than half of the world's sea-borne oil and hosts twenty-three of the world's top 100 container ports. However, it is often seen through a highly securitized lens. Three major powers which account for nearly half of global economy in the Indian Ocean arena, India, China, and United States, are vying for influence. China's large and growing economic investment is reshaping the region, forcing both US and India to adapt. It has the maritime silk road which is half of the Belt and Road Initiative. United States reacted to it with the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pivot strategy, and India through its Look-East policy. Pakistan, being one of the major trade corridors in IOR, possesses the golden chair. The paper is an attempt to investigate the tripolar great game amongst Beijing, Washington and New Delhi and examines whether the thrust is regional cooperation, competition, or acute confrontation. (Baqai, 2021, February 12) The parallel themes of twenty-first century regionalism and a crisscross of geopolitics and geoeconomics will also be factored in.*

### Introduction:

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Historically, the Indian Ocean Region has been an important but largely a depoliticized region. In recent years however, the region has gained more political importance and has become a space for strategic competition between certain major powers (Cordner, 2010). It is increasingly being defined by a tripolar competition between New Delhi, Beijing, and Washington. The equation between the three countries is extremely complicated. India and China cooperate, compete, and confront with each other. US is increasingly in confrontation with China and has roped in India. Their interests are increasingly zero-sum, at least from a short-term perspective. However, win-win remains an option. For now, the rivalry amongst the great powers in the Indian Ocean region has dimensions of militarization, economic contests, and arms race.

US-China rivalry has become a dominant theme of international relations for the past two years. COVID-19 has given it a lot of tailwind. Initially, the verdict was in favor of China. However, many think US is back in the game. The rivalry shapes both strategic debates and real political, military, and economic dynamics. The tensions threaten to engulf the entire world and could lead to an Armageddon-like clash between the two military and technology giants, said Henry Kissinger, the architect of the 1971 warming up of relations between Washington and Beijing. He was speaking to the McCain Institute's Sedona Forum on Global Issues. He further adds on to say that it carries more risks than the cold war with the Soviet Union, where the two rival superpowers used every possible means to pursue the conflict.

The unipolar world, post the cold war, created a power vacuum which gave birth to the strategic competition between US and China. There came a clear shift in economic wealth distribution worldwide that has stimulated terms like the 'Asian Century,' and significantly enhanced the role of regional organizations like ASEAN, BRICS and SCO. COVID-19 has further fueled the rivalry and US global leadership stands questioned. Any unwise move might increase the risk of the two countries falling into the 'Thucydides trap'. Most importantly, it may result in Asia becoming a battleground for US-China rivalry. The growing tensions between an existing and an emerging superpower has further complicated the already stressful South Asian security environment. South Asia is important to both US and Chinese objectives due to its inter-regional connectivity. The rise of China has increased India's importance for US to advance its defense cooperation. Its obvious leanings towards India to counterbalance China in the region has direct ramifications for Pakistan, thus disturbing the strategic stability in South Asia. The Indian Ocean is increasingly becoming ground zero.

### **US-China Rivalry:**



US is in a stronger position than China, given its lead in technology and armament, its numerous and powerful allies, and its extensive overseas forward deployment of military forces. Geographically speaking, US is also flanked by two oceans and has borders with only two relatively weak neighbors. Whereas China is located in a crowded neighborhood of several other middle powers like Japan, Russia, India and of course, the US with its Asian outposts (Chan, 2019). China's military capabilities have grown. However, it does not want war, at least it will not initiate one. Beyond the near seas, it is difficult for China to fight major militaries. Beijing lacks the much-needed strong network of overseas allies, bases, logistics and defenses that America has developed over decades to mitigate such problems. Reducing this disparity even incrementally would require spending, time and policy changes on a scale that Beijing may not be able to do immediately (Erickson, 2014). What is bringing the paradigm shift is the strategic vision of geo-economic connectivity that China has rolled out.

China's large and growing economic investment is reshaping the region, forcing both US and India to adapt. China has the maritime silk road which is half of the Belt and Road Initiative (Baqai, 2021, February 12). It has become an influential international player and has made economic investments from Asia to Africa. According to statistics by the World Bank, the share of China's GDP in the world economy has increased from 1.2% to 9.3% from 1979 to 2010. It expanded to approximately \$11 trillion in 2016, world second highest after US (Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Chicago, 2017). It is the world's largest exporting nation. While the US economy has been struggling since the COVID-19 outbreak, China's economy has picked up speed. China's economic growth, measured in GDP, grew 2.3% in 2020. This makes China the only major economy in the world to avoid a contraction. Many economists have been surprised with the speed of its recovery, especially as it navigated tense relations with the US (BBC News, 2021, January 22).

The United States' relationship with China has evolved greatly over the last few decades. It has been described to be a cyclical relationship, going through periods of cooperation and stability and periods of dislike and antagonism (Medeiros, 2019). China is clearly building a navy designed to protect its own interests but is not engaging in what would be termed a "symmetric" naval competition with the US. It has shifted the focus of People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) "from offshore waters defense to the combination of offshore waters defense with open seas protection." (Wu, 2019) PLAN is now the largest navy in the world. The development was announced by US Department of Defense 2020 annual report (Colley, 2021). China focuses on US force enablers, particularly basing, aerial tankers and logistics ships, and long-range intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance



platforms. Whereas US Navy is making efforts to develop smaller, more lethal, and more distributed forces (Clark & Wilson 2017), thus both crafting responses to each other.

United States reacted to the growing Chinese role in the IOR, with Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pivot strategy. The US definition of Indo-pacific stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States, excluding western Indian Ocean including Pakistan, The Middle East, and East Africa (Haruko, 2020). It is geographically and geo-strategically narrow and is both myopic and unsustainable. It is largely focused on competing with or curtailing China. Middle powers like Australia and Japan also do not want the Indo-pacific to be defined by the US-China rivalry. Smaller Southeast Asian nations live under the shadow of Sino-US competition and do not want to make invidious decisions or overtly pick sides. China sees economic and military opportunities in areas of strategic neglect by Washington and has actively sought to explore these opportunities over the past two decades.

### **China-India Rivalry:**

Competition between China and India is driven to a large extent by their asymmetric economic rise and the rapid associated growth in, and dependence on, seaborne trade and imported energy, much of which transits the Indian Ocean. China's BRI in South and Central Asia and the IOR, when set in context with China's assertive behavior in the East China Sea and the South China Sea and border tensions with India, is contributing to a growing rivalry between India and China.

The rivalry, which previously had been largely limited to the Himalayan region where the two nations fought a border war in 1962, revived again in 2020 with China giving India a bloody nose. This has only made India more maritime-focused. India feels encircled by China's strategic moves in the region while China feels threatened by its limited ability to secure its sea lanes. Understanding and effectively managing this evolving security dynamic may be crucial to preserving regional stability.

India is creating strong ties with Vietnam and Mongolia to counter the Chinese "String of Pearls" strategy. India has been creating a "Necklace of Diamonds" to counter the String of Pearls. The Necklace of Diamonds comprises Changi Naval Base in Singapore, Chabahar Port in Iran, the Assumption Islands in Seychelles, and Duqm Port in Oman. China has invested US\$60 billion in Africa under its String of Pearls strategy, whereas India's largest investment for its Necklace of Diamonds amounts to \$8 billion, in Chabahar Port (Bubna, & Mishra, 2020, July 14).



The noteworthy investment made by India that affects China significantly has been at Sabang, Indonesia, which is close to the Malacca Strait. Around 80% of China's oil imports pass through that strait, thereby making India's presence in the region a point of concern for China (Bubna, & Mishra, 2020, July 14). Though both countries have strong allies, during the current pandemic crisis, no country wants to get into a cold war with China, which supplies essential pharmaceutical products to nations worldwide. Hence India's Necklace of Diamonds strategy to counter China's influential networks may not work in the current situation.

Overall, India and China treat each other with a degree of mistrust (Malik, 2016). Despite the various issues, China is currently India's biggest trade partner. Therefore, their relationship is not an overtly competitive one. Their growing military strengths as well as economic interdependence keep the countries from getting into open conflict. The most interesting part of this relationship is the power dynamic between the countries. While China is incredibly important when it comes to Indian policy making and military planning, there is a disbalance on the Chinese end. India is a factor in Chinese decision making, but to a smaller extent. China's primary focus is on the United States' presence in Asia. Further, their economic relationship is also disbalanced. The Chinese economy is significantly bigger than India's, creating a power dynamic that is uncomfortable for India. What they do have in common however, is a major dependence on maritime trade. Many of the maritime activities of the countries have come about as counter-plays. It is a classic example of a crisscross of geopolitics and geoeconomics. China's String of Pearls strategy was met with India's Necklace of Diamonds (Zhu, 2011). Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative was met with India's Look-East Think West policy and the United States' focus on the Indo-Pacific.

### **Pakistan's Role:**

Pakistan is an important littoral state in the Indian Ocean Region. It is also a neighbor of both India and China and has a long history with the United States. The recent developments in the IOR have been concerning for Pakistan because India's growth and nuclear expansion in the region are viewed with concern. The most recent being India working to build six nuclear-powered attack submarines, or SSNs, as part of the defense establishment's continuing focus on expanding the navy's capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond. US is also encouraging Indian growth in the region to act as a counter to China.

Pakistan has responded to the developments in the IOR by stating that it will take all necessary steps to ensure that the country is secure against any Indian actions (Bastos, 2014). It is important for Pakistan to stay out of conflict but to walk a fine line of security

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management at the same time. Pakistan is already a player in the game because of its alliance with China. Pakistan is part of China's BRI plan and has a stable and strong relationship with the country. India and Pakistan's turbulent history makes it so that this alliance is an issue for India. Further, it is thought that through Pakistan's exclusion from certain bodies like the Indian Ocean Rim Association, India is making an effort to isolate Pakistan in global politics. As it stands, Pakistan does not have a comprehensive strategy in the Indian Ocean Region, something that has been pointed out to be a great fault. While the CPEC is important to help Pakistan's economy, it has both, land, and maritime facets. Currently, Pakistan's focus is on the land aspect and the maritime aspect is left untouched. This need to be changed to protect its position in the IOR (Farid, 2020).

Being one of the major trade corridors in IOR, Pakistan is in the unique position of playing a positive role in the complex geostrategic and geo-economic conflict matrix of the region, (Baqai, 2021 February 12). linking the maritime and continental components of the Belt and Road Initiative, thus becoming a bridge between US and China.

#### **Aman-21: Face of Pakistan's Indian Ocean Policy:**

The Aman-21 initiative, with the participation by 45 navies around the world, under the motto "Together for Peace", is the face of Pakistan's Indian Ocean Policy. Its major objective is to contribute to regional peace and stability, and more importantly, bridging the gaps for peace and enhancing inter and intra operability between regional and extra regional navies. World's top took part in the series, held every two years since 2007. The exercise held in February 2021 was even more significant, because the three largest navies of US, China and Russia exercised for collaborative maritime security model. It is also for the first time in a decade that "Russian Black Sea Fleet" with three ships took part in the joint military exercise with NATO members (Baqai, 2021, February 12).

The Aman series is an ideal forum for the exchange of information, mutual understanding, and identification of areas of common interests. It may enable regional navies to better deal with common challenges in the maritime domain while avoiding frictions. Indian Ambassador M. K. Bhadrakumar acknowledges it as the biggest event of its kind in the Indian Ocean or anywhere. He adds on to say that "Aman-21 makes a mockery of India's aspiration to be a 'net security provider' for littoral States in the Indian Ocean" and calls it Pakistan's growing diplomatic clout as a "regional power on spectacular display (Bhadrakumar, 2021, February 17)."

Pakistan's unique geostrategic location is further enhanced with the development of deep-sea Gwadar port. It is located close to the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important

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oil transit check point. It also has the distinction of connecting South Asia, Middle East, and Central Asia. It is all about bridging gaps for peace and stability. It is committed to countering the new cold war unfolding on the sea lanes between the major power of the world (Baqai, 2021, February 12).

### **Conclusion:**

Indian Ocean has not witnessed conflict between states for more than thirty years. This should not change, more so because the twenty-first century regionalism focuses less on favored market access and more on specifics strengthening international supply chains. Twenty-first century regionalism and China's BRI may become the precursor for strong intra and inter-regional integration. The world is experiencing a paradigm shift from strategic alliances to regional integration and economic cooperation among states. The twenty-first century is driven by multiple sets of political economic forces where the spatial clusters and specialization thrust initiated by China is far reaching. It is being adopted by Eurasia and Africa. The Indian Ocean is the bedrock of global economic maritime activity in the twenty-first century.

Ryan Hass, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said that under the Biden Administration, the Sino-American relationship is moving gradually from sharp confrontation to deep competition. Beijing, Washington, and New Delhi must at best cooperate and at worst compete, acute confrontation is not an option.

The three factors that cannot be ignored are: the rising relevance of twenty-first century regionalism, a crisscross of geopolitics and geoeconomics globally, and importance of healthcare and climate more than power and arms in the post COVID-19 world. The new cold war is not about ideology, it is unfolding around the paradigms of efficiency.



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