

# STRATEGIC POWERPLAY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND PAKISTAN

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## Abstract

*Indian Ocean is in limelight due to trade, connectivity, regional conflicts and tug of competition for dominance. Corresponding rising interest, naval competition, presence of world's great and extra-regional powers, terrorism, and opposing states make this ocean a pivotal strategic theatre. Being a strategic fulcrum, the US, China and India are key contenders. The US, having India as its strategic ally, is employing its counter-balancing strategy against China. China envisions 'Common future Common growth' policy through its Belt and Road Initiative and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy succeeds the Asia-Pacific rebalance. Iran's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean is its strategic compulsion to combat its "geopolitical isolation" via energy diplomacy. The European Union views the strategic and political developments in the Indian Ocean from the side-lobes. Pakistan geographically has superior strategic orientation being at the gateway of energy highways and enjoys great geo-strategic superiority, especially in view of China's BRI and its flagship CPEC. This qualitative causal research, employing deductive reasoning for analysis & inferences, studies the Indian Ocean powerplay and tug of influence while drawing strategic recommendations for Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Foreign Policy, Strategic Balance, Maritime Security.

## Introduction

Since ages, doctrinal principle of *freedom-at-sea* had steered use of oceans. This also became the cardinal principle of management, exploration and jurisdiction over oceans, resulting in the *United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea-1982* (UNCLOS-82). The UNCLOS roots in the belief that "Oceans are the common heritage of mankind."<sup>1</sup> However, with the evolution of human societies from varying genesis of nations, and their expanding socio-economic and security imperatives led to defining their politico-strategic interests in the oceans that cover around 140 million square miles and 72% of the globe;<sup>2</sup> thus, giving birth to both cooperation and competition. These conflicting and opposing strategic interests in the seas are based on combination of number of reasons spanning from usage of oceans, their limits of jurisdiction, longing for dominance, resources exploration, navigation far

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from home, political objectives, economic interests, maritime security, military use of oceans – and so on.

Though UNCLOS has 138 States signatories<sup>3</sup>, including the European Union (EU), interestingly not the United States (US), sea conflicts still exist and strike international peace and stability, Wilsonian principles<sup>4</sup> and Chapter VII of the UN Charter.<sup>5</sup> Be it foreign policy where oceans are defined from grand-strategic lens, or operational-strategic perspective of maritime doctrines, the strategists and policymakers keep focusing how oceans serve their national interests. From the Phoenician<sup>6</sup> boats including galleys of the Greek and Roman periods in 1100 BC till modern-day blue-water fleets, all nation-states strategize and policify their interests in the oceans vis-à-vis one's strategic ambitions. Such as the United States (US) with its global interests, frame its geo-strategic interests in its policies and security strategies worldwide, whereas a smaller state operating brown water navy only aim safeguarding its maritime zones.<sup>7</sup>

Alfred T. Mahan, US maritime strategist, views that history of sea power exhibits its undeniable and great influence on power of the nation-states; and, asserts that the disputes and economic competition on oceans pre-dominantly resulted in the military wrestles<sup>8</sup>; thus, '*the control of the sea is and has been a great factor in the history of the world.*'<sup>9</sup> Throughout history, one can identify that global politics have been hopping from one ocean to other. And, Mahanian philosophy is being asserted which emphasises, and rightly so, that none but the Navies have emerged to be the foremost protagonists for following vital missions<sup>10</sup>:

- First, a nation-state asserts its politico-strategic influence overseas;
- Second, one projects its military power, as means of deterrence or compliance;
- Third, to defend maritime borders against any aggression, and support forces ashore as per overall military strategy of a country.
- Fourth, it's a navy and other para-naval outfits such as coastguard organisations or maritime security agencies a state has its disposal to safeguard its maritime interests, wherever and whatsoever are identified in the national strategic designs;
- Fifth, to protect Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) including economic & trade interests, wherein energy need remains foremost of all as it sparks and sustains one's national socio-economic and industrial paraphernalia;
- Sixth, a state may employ a navy in undertaking benign operations such as Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HA&DR) Ops; and

combating maritime law enforcement functions against non-traditional threats

- Seventh, a state essentially employs its navy to be one of the premier tools of nation's diplomacy.

## Indian Ocean - Sea of Future

The Indian Ocean is boon and a bane (at least today); volatile and rich. Admiral (Retd) James Starvidis US Navy, terms the Pacific Ocean as 'the Mother of Oceans'; the Atlantic Ocean as 'the Cradle of Colonisation'; the Mediterranean Sea 'where War at Sea began'; and, the Indian Ocean as 'the Future Sea'<sup>11</sup>. It provides central trade routes as artery of global trade;<sup>12</sup> and it connects as the hub of world's energy in the Middle East. Number of reasons make the Indian Ocean the hottest and the most important one. It has strategic chokepoints i.e. Strait of Hormuz, Bab-ul-Mandeb, Horn of Africa, Suez Canal through the Red Sea and Strait of Malacca – through which mammoth global trade and crude hydrocarbons sail worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, correspondingly rise strategic and maritime security challenges which depends on '*principal variables*' comprising naval competition, presence of world's great and extra-regional powers, terrorism, inter-state rivalry and conflicts.<sup>14</sup> Also, there exist number of non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, drug-trafficking, smuggling, marine pollution, illegal fishing and illegal immigration.<sup>15</sup> Having 65% of world's known oil reserves and 35% of gas, the Indian Ocean is the "epicentre of maritime economy and military presence."<sup>16</sup> The most horrifying and biggest threats to peace and stability of the Ocean entail its militarisation, unprecedented advancements in military technology and corresponding arms race, nuclear status of players (the US, China, India, Pakistan, EU country France, and to an extent Russia) present in the region and power projections by non-Indian Ocean nations.<sup>17</sup> And this trend seems to intensify in the coming years.

Politically, this third largest ocean is a pivotal theatre of strategic contest and military dominance. And the only military instrument to project and exercise power on oceans, at own frontiers and those of potential rivals, is a robust navy. Inherent flexibility, sustenance, reach, poise, endurance and flexibility of operation with navies make them best strategic and operational force for defence of own territory and accomplish the extended objectives. Distinct from other forces, navies' peacetime operational areas are same as of their wartime deployments. It is for this reason that all the major global players of international politics are growing, maintaining, operating and primarily investing on one force - navy.

Major players in the region, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States are operating blue Water navies having global reach. In addition, there are blue-water aspirants Australia and India with limited regional reach. The oceans, in absolute terms, act as critical enablers to create riches, project power, safeguard economic and security interests and influence international politics in war or peace.<sup>18</sup> The US with the largest navy maintain its presence in almost every ocean. The Indian Ocean houses Central Fleet, Combined Task Force 150 against terrorism, and Combined Task Force 151 against piracy. The EU has its presence as EU-NAVFOR. China undertakes anti-piracy and random patrols. India consistently pursues its Mission-Based Deployments (MBDs) and maritime security operations. Iran attempts its maritime influence through its navy and its coast guard; and Pakistan is not only an active participant of US-led CTFs but also undertakes Regional Maritime Security Patrol (RMSP) and is trying to sweep participation of other nations.

### **Strategic Tripolar Competition in the Indian Ocean**

In our day, the Indian Ocean has indeed become 'the ocean of future' (as Admiral James termed it) enjoying significance in global affairs and acting as the strategic fulcrum of international politics.<sup>19</sup> The key actors in this strategic contest are the US, China and India; however, other nation-states or block(s) also have notable stakes in ongoing *geo-oceanics*. The strategic and economic competition leading to power politics between the US and China transited to this Ocean.

In regional context, Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Yemen crises in the Middle East, and great powers competition in Central Asia heat up new great game in politico-socially marred region. Humanitarian and insurgency crises in Africa make serious concern for world. US-China new cold war engulfs world and triggers block-politics; it ripples from the Indian to Pacific oceans. Taiwan and South China seas add up to the US-China resentment. Unending longest war of US in Afghanistan and failing US-Taliban peace deal are boiling up South Asia where chronic conflicts amongst nuclear triangle is increasing volatility. Rivalry between China and India, and Pakistan and India seek a mediator. India-biased policies of US further destabilize the region. US-Iran row on nuclear proliferation is a hotspot and volatile issue in the region. Projects like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which promise shared growth for shared future are being endangered.<sup>20</sup> In Asia, antagonism between North Korea and US is another foreign policy challenge of US. Evacuating Afghanistan to invade any other country would be a grand-strategic blunder that would seriously crack US leadership role in the world order. Corona is worsening the human predicament. As of March 31, 2021, there have been 128,971,684 confirmed cases of COVID-19; including 2,819,170 deaths.<sup>21</sup> All of it

is leading to one thing: human predicament. Indian Ocean region given its socio-economic quandary suffers more.

Insensitive to ongoing conflicts and pandemic shocks, the US, having India as its strategic ally, seeks to realise its counter-balancing strategy against China. These three powers making almost 50% of the world's economy seek dominance in the Indian Ocean. India, China, and the US view their prospective role in the Indian Ocean with different geo-strategic lens to identify its role in the tug of power. India pursues its "*Security and Growth for all the Region*" agenda, which mixes India's "*Act (or Look) East and the Think West*" policies<sup>22</sup>. In Indian Military Maritime Strategy, India claims to be the 'Net Security Provider' vying for a blue status, with competing fleet, and its comprehensive nuclear triad.<sup>23</sup> The US, its Western allies and India being the strategic partner of US, view China's economic and connectivity initiatives with suspicion. China propels its vision of '*Common future Common growth*' policy through its economic engagements in the larger region, its Belt and Road Initiative, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road.<sup>24</sup> China has been investing largely both in Asia and Africa to promote global connectivity as China propagates. The US continues with its *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which succeeded its *Asia-Pacific Rebalance*.

The frameworks and policies of the competitors diverge as they view differently about the Middle East, terrorism, peace in Afghanistan and Middle East, maritime security, relations with regional countries including Pakistan, overall global alliance structure and the military and non-military balance in respective foreign policies. Given the China-India conflict in the northern frontiers, and their recent 14/15 June 2020 stand-off in the Galwan valley gave further heat to this tripolar competition. Interestingly, the US has been mute and passive to side its strategic partner India, the Indian strategists weigh their strategic gains in the partnership vis-à-vis respective geo-strategic aims and objectives.

Presence of the US in the Indian Ocean has its roots in its fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, Middle East, securing of its energy needs, maintaining regional hegemon status amongst others; but Islamic Republic of Iran is the country in the world which needs a more focus when it comes to volatility of the Indian Ocean region (North Korea in the Pacific). Iran's strategic interests in this Ocean is founded on its strategic compulsion to combat its "geopolitical isolation"<sup>25</sup> to garner weight in the regional and global politics. Iran keeps steering its economic and security engagements to assert itself as a key stakeholder in the strategic powerplay in the Indian Ocean.<sup>26</sup> A vital element of Iran's strategic thought has been diplomatic leverage it achieves employing its energy diplomacy<sup>27</sup>, merging economic objectives and its bigger strategic aims; more recently taking across the Atlantic Ocean in the backyard of the US. For the US, it's a dilemma too as India and Iran enjoy cordial

relations and the US and Iran are at daggers drawn in the nuclear proliferation and ideological perspectives keeping the US-Saudi handshake.

Currently, the European Union gazes the strategic developments in the Indian Ocean from side lobes.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, any political chaos, regional instability in the Indian Ocean that may spill over to global turmoil and security in general and maritime security situation shall cast very direct and significant adverse effects on the EU, its trade, its resource stockpile, energy needs; thus the economic fiber.<sup>29</sup> Being its alignment with the US, the EU would be in stand-by position, in all estimations, to side by the US, if any situation warrants.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conceiving Positive US Role to Stabilise Region**

In his inaugural speech, Mr. Joseph Biden announced a changed paradigm of US foreign policy: from example of power to power of example.<sup>31</sup> During his first foreign policy discourse, he sounded positive heralding, “America is back, American diplomacy is back.” His presidential term would last until January 20, 2025. Lot of time trails with him to bandage the bruised world, to lead the world to peace. But, the stepping ahead is needed; first step is to be taken. A right step in a right direction. What should US do? Prime thing is to believe and act like a global leader. For that, foremost is to respect international institutions, and their directions. United Nations was built for collective security and collective peace, for finding solutions to problems amongst the nation-states. Resolutions of the UN, be it on Kashmir issue or Palestine dispute, must be followed and respected. Returning to World Health Organization (WHO), and Paris Climate Agreement augur well for US and the world. Reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran can fetch stability in South Asia and Middle East, rather world politics. He-should-do first diplomatic rigidity is only delaying peace, and escalating friction.

US is in position to promote stabilising Iran and Saudi Arabia ideological wrestle; this would aid in US aim of stability in Middle East, and safeguarding interests of its pampered child – Israel- in Middle East. Syria and Yemen crises need attention. US is rightful in restraining itself out of any offensive action in these crises. US-Conquest of influence, strategic dominance, and trade war with China can be calmed down. Chinese President clearly stated frequently that China was not trying to replace US in the world order; however, economic projects and economic uplift for ‘common growth’ should be encouraged. Sanctions and military (power) diplomacy need to be abandoned by US. As Biden said, he would restore alliances and engage with the world, US-Europe normalization of ties, and effective engagement with Russia, and North Korea are loud to assert that table talk and effective diplomacy is key.

## Pakistan's Maritime Perspective

US-China new Cold War spread from the shores of Atlantic to Indian and Pacific oceans, has re-elicited block-politics. Indian Ocean is witnessing an increased geopolitical contest of great and rising powers. US policy shift of pivot-to-Asia and Trump era Indo-Pacific delineation have caused the region to become a zone of competition turning to confrontation.<sup>32</sup> Taiwan and South China seas issues, and the position of China?

Geographically, Pakistan enjoys superior strategic orientation being at the doorstep of energy highways in the Indian Ocean.<sup>33</sup> The country, with 290,000 sq Km of Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf, over the wall with Afghanistan, China and India, is an important littoral state.<sup>34</sup> Around 15 million barrels of crude oil from the Gulf region to the world passes close to Pakistani coast.<sup>35</sup> Since it lays the shortest sea access to Afghanistan, Central Asian States and China. For China, this geography is particularly vital, so Pakistan makes the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China's One Belt One Red initiative (OBOR). Along with enormous maritime potential, the country enjoys great geo-strategic and geo-military superiority since the Cold War, the Middle East crises and recent Global War on Terror.<sup>36</sup> Role of Pakistan in the US-led wars in Afghanistan are manifestation of the same. But unwisely, Pakistan's Indian Ocean policy continues to be invisible<sup>37</sup> – a self-imposed blindness. The word *Indian Ocean* is unconceived both in its foreign, maritime and defence policies. Even, the Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan makes a benign mention of maritime environment and the benign prose about the Indian Ocean<sup>38</sup> with no policy thinking of Pakistan. Though there are many force-level maritime security and defence initiatives by Pak Navy; and to promote maritime awareness and transform prevalent continental mindset, yet the destination seems far that Pakistani national policymaking shares understanding with Mahan, Corbett, Pannikar; and (in the absence of any strategic thinker to credit) Pakistan, being India-centric in its plans, may indulge in maritime strategic think-race with India and incorporate oceans in its (grand)strategic designs.

Overall, there exists great probability of as much strategic friction in the Indian Ocean as much strategic perspectives differ. It may dent or make attainment of geo-strategic objectives by any competitor complex. Resultantly, it is gradually giving significant leverage to China which steps with an integrated and consistent approach comparing incoherent and rambling policy of the US, and much inward-looking lens of India. China, appealingly, has an all-encompassing policy. This wide-ranging collaboration is steering China towards cohesive efforts for trade, commercial, political, and military enterprises from South China Sea all over the African region.<sup>39</sup> In such scenario, Pakistan, being a strategic partner of China, may

end up reaping some strategic and political dividends; however, Pakistan is still failing to find balance in its foreign policy with Chinese and Western bonding not to mention its domestic governance and economic turmoil further aggravated in COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of tripolar competition amongst the US, India and China, it is viewed that China thus far has ominously lengthened its collaborative or capacity building interactions in the Indian Ocean for last thirty years.<sup>40</sup> Such growing regional Chinese influence, and global economic growth has made the US and Indians increasingly sceptical about China's developing naval fleet, its mounting sea presence in the Indian Ocean, when cumulatively seen with its economic engagements with smaller countries. It fetches distant military leverage and strategic room to China far from its own immediate region<sup>41</sup>.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Quad, makes an answer to US grand strategy. Quad threads the US, Australia, Japan and India certainly enjoy commonality of their strategic aims against China. All view Asia-Pacific landscape through US prism. Countering China in its own backyard, in the Indo-Pacific, is aim Quad set in 2007. Having been dormant due internal rifts of the countries and disharmonized approach, the Quad partnership was resurrected recently. The partner countries held a virtual Quad summit mid-March 2021. Interestingly, it was the maiden one by Mr. Joe Biden after he was sworn in the presidential throne. China firmly propagated that Quad's containment strategy would not succeed and the Quad led by the US should let go the "their Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice". Shifting from their conceived aims, the Quad expanded from maritime cooperation to Corona vaccine too, assigning India to spearhead the vaccine production and regional distribution hub. Inclusion of India in Afghan peace is also a strategic concern for Pakistan.

The above-stated functions of a naval force ride on the turbulent maritime security environment, shaped by traditional and non-traditional threats. Such choppy security situation and challenges are almost alike in every region including Indian Ocean. Rather, Indian Ocean, the 3rd largest one after the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, has acquired much greater significance. Owing to its pivotal position bridging the Global East and the West, the Indian Ocean carries around 60% of maritime highways' burden plying through it. Energy fan-faring from the Middle East for the World make this region in general, and Arabian sea in particular, central to global politics in the perspective of geo-economics. Perpetual geo-strategic bouts of the US with China and Iran, and competition for influence have resulted strategic cyclone in the region.

Amongst the 38 states of the Indian Ocean, Pakistan remains one of the countries with its politico-strategic weight in the global affairs, and its geographical

bearing. For defence of its maritime frontiers, accomplishment of foreign policy goals through naval diplomacy, ensuring forceful maritime security, Pakistan maintains a robust and potent navy in the Indian Ocean region. The Navy, following its national policy of 'peaceful co-existence' continues to advocate greater regional harmony and promote maritime cooperation for regional stability.

Against both traditional and non-traditional threats, Pakistan Navy has demonstrated its commitment for regional harmony and cooperation. Its participation in US-led Combined Maritime Task Forces 150 (Counterterrorism) and 151 (Counter-piracy) are reflective of Pakistan's policy of collaborative and cooperative engagements for global and regional causes of promoting peace through ensuring security. Regional Maritime Security Patrols (RMSP), Task Force-88 for maritime security of the gateway of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and Pakistan Navy's active participation in other regional and international bilateral and multilateral maritime ventures are all but for one purpose of maintaining collective good order at sea. Recently in February 2021, the 7th AMAN exercise embraced more than 45 countries to endorse Pakistan's maritime resolve against traditional and non-traditional maritime threats in the Indian Ocean region.

All the ongoing geostrategic developments and happenings in the Indian Ocean have implications for Pakistan. In Pakistan's national security perspective, its strong naval vigilance and collaborative maritime presence in the Indian Ocean is a strategic compulsion, not a choice. A stronger and compatible navy is a core national need, not an option.

## Conclusion

Since primitive era, oceans hold an essential and important place in the strategic thinking of nations, states and today's nation-states vying for strategic goals to be achieved through oceans politics or geo-oceanics. Though all oceans of the world attract comparable significance for one reason or the other, yet the Indian Ocean, the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest of the oceans make itself the hottest, sensitive, significant and volatile for an array of reasons – trade and economic reasons, energy supplies, politico-strategic imperatives, resourcefulness, maritime security, presence of Extra-Regional Forces and multitude of conflicts heating up bowl of the Ocean.

A grand tug of strategic dominance amongst the Great Powers and the Rising Powers is underway in the Indian Ocean. Though the world moves to multilateralism and regional blocking, the US is likely to be the *uni-pole* of power and regional hegemon. China and India, under India-biased umpiring of the US, would remain principal contenders building up military, political and economic

muscles for strategic tilt of power in one's favour. India, the second largest in region, could not comprehensively establish and maintain interdependencies in region in economic and strategic terms; thus, it offering void filled by the more integrated and all-encompassing Chinese approach for proclaimed socio-economic good of the smaller states in the region. The US and China would continue to remain in the implicit and explicit competition predominantly for economic gains, regional alliances and geo-strategic influence. The rift between Iran and the US is likely to dominate the regional politics whereas the EU continues with passivity.

Government of Pakistan should essentially factor-in its oceanic strategy in its foreign and maritime policies, spelling out how it views the ongoing powerplay in the Indian Ocean while crafting its course of action to safeguard its national interests. Pakistan ought to proactively engage other regional players through effective maritime diplomacy and promote maritime cooperation to combat traditional and non-traditional maritime threats. A fresh look at the role of oceans in pursuing national aims and the requirement of stronger navy and para-maritime forces is need of the hour not only to counter national security threats in maritime domain but also to leverage Pakistan in maritime domain vis-à-vis growing maritime muscles and competition in the Indian Ocean region. Shift of geo-politics to geo-economics, security of maritime trade, especially in the CPEC perspective, exponentially raises demands of a stronger, robust and all-inclusive navy and stronger maritime foothold of Pakistan in the region.

When it comes to the smaller nation-states, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, Myanmar etc., they can gain much from various capacity building, socio-economic and infrastructural initiatives in the policy framework of the bigger nations competing for the strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean. The smaller states, however, are to choose and act with strategic sagacity for their national interests and uplift of their socioeconomic standards rather than being grass for the wrestle amongst the elephants.

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