Indian Ocean: A Contesting Theatre Among Major Powers
(U.S.A, China, and India)
Analytical View Post 9/11

Under The Supervision of

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**Introduction**

The Indian Ocean has been zone of human interaction for several decades. It is comprised of the coastal areas between four major continents of the world including Africa, Australia, Asia and Antarctica. The major power always has key concerns in the Indian Ocean region. After the demise of former USSR, the new contesting scenario emerged among the great powers to challenge the hegemony of their involvement in the Ocean.

“The Indian Ocean and its littorals contain about a third of the world’s population, 25% of the global landmass, and about 40% of the world’s oil and gas resources, it is likely to become an arena for a new, emerging extra-regional great power China that will increasingly become present in the Indian Ocean because it has compelling interests that will bring it there and, in the process, create tensions involving the resident great power.”

This scenario will shape the future of Indian Ocean more tense by providing the puzzled weapons of mass destruction as worst security challenge to the regional players in broader political, economic, and strategic agendas. The states having nuclear capacity and key vital interests holds an influential role in every kind of dynamics of Indian Ocean. That’s why the more horizontal proliferation will cause the change in structural constraints that provide a

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status quo in the region. “Indian Ocean a great highway, a wide common, this region contains substantial quantities of energy resources. This is particularly so in the case of oil, coal and natural gas.”\(^2\)

The critical assessment of the Indian Ocean provided that it implies the world largest trade transition of natural resources. Its littoral states comprised the immense growth of economy and population. This phenomenon got the attraction of major powers like US and China to entertain their national interests. The national interest in terms of economic integration along with other factors needs a fluent navigation of trade routes of major powers. “US interest in the region is to prevent external hegemonic control over critical geopolitical areas of the world, and to prevent the rise of other threats against its hegemony, expand the liberal political order internationally and to sustain an open economic regime.”\(^3\)

The United States is trying to promote the liberal economic order that no one could ever undermine the status quo of its hegemony in the regional economic order in trade routes. The hegemonic design inevitably compels the regional major actors like China and India to retreat. In this game there emerged the collision of interests as well as the convergence of interest’s i.e. Indo-US strategic and economic alliance is being reciprocated by the passive rise of Chinese economy along with


strategic mapping of the region in shape of what is known as Strings of Pearl matrix.

In October 2007 naval corps and marine central command issued its maritime strategy document for the next few decades which explains the addition of Indian Ocean naval corps along with the pacific and Atlantic divisions. A greater arc of conflict is in the greater Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Maritime core issued its vision statement in 2008 for next few decades which further illustrates US naval strategy on Indian and Pacific Ocean.

After 9/11 American security ties to South Asian nations bolstered suddenly. The ignorant behavior of United States regarding the recognition of Taliban and with the every possibility tried to neutralize the Taliban-Al Qaeda ties. Pakistan-America ties were getting stronger after Bush declaration before ground operations in Afghanistan. The 9/11 incident brought a new turn in the strategic equation in the South Asian politics, where influence of America insecure China and Russia. The U.S. decision to take on against terrorism by introducing global war on terrorism has significantly an objective to resurrect the Indian Ocean dilemma. The presence of US troops in the regional jargon will inevitably create contesting features among the regional actors because the strategic shift in the policy of US created the skeptic view in the cognition of regional actors. This skepticism
provided the way towards the regional contest in economic, political, and strategic fronts.

Primarily US policy should be based on these six principles in South Asia which were made by the policy makers; Firstly always be considered in the light of American national interests in their worldwide extent, secondly recognize the present American heavy involvement and great stake in the future to the countries and people of the area, thirdly develop an integrated approach that gives due attention to the impact of specific actions and of long-term policies on the balance of forces there, fourthly pay special attention to the internal dynamics of the political and social systems, fifthly be based on independent appraisal to avoid any impression of simply endorsing the positions of other countries in the area and outside and sixthly avoid any pressure to “choose” Pakistan and India.

**Research Question**

Why there is an increasing hegemonic enmity between great powers in Indian Ocean?

**Research Objectives**

Following are the key objectives of my research:

- To elucidate the key dominant actors in Indian Ocean.
- The research will contribute to understand the contesting future in Indian Ocean.
• To find out the interests of dominant actors.

**Literature Review**

1. "The influence of sea Powers upon History” written By “Alfred Thayer Mahan” Published By, Little, Brown and Co, 1890. In this book the writer has focused on the eventual transformation and advancement in the naval world primarily 1660 to 1783. During this period, according to writer, there was a massive change in the naval power of different empire occurred. The writer has built a narrative that Great Britain capabilities in all dynamics are the outcome of its naval capacities in shape of combat and merchant fleet. To prove this argument, writer gave the examples of certain war’s victory of Great Britain directed by its naval forces. In the final section, the provision of traditional naval doctrines in contemporary naval competition between states is largely focused by the Captain Mahan.

2. "Indian Ocean and the Super Power” written By “”Rasul Baksh Rais” Published By, Vistar New Delhi, India, 1987. The writer has focused on the US inevitable role in the Indian Ocean Region after the withdrawal of Britain from this hemisphere. The cold war competition brought the super power to contain the geopolitical foe in shape of Soviet Union. The Soviet marginalization was taken over during the presidency of Nixon. In the beginning author has focused the procrastination of US to define a well prepared naval strategy in the region. It decided to go on after facing number of events in the regional hemisphere during 70s and 80s. Being a Pakistani writer, he has focused on the vulnerability of Pakistan during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Pakistan as key ally of US to stop the emerging foe in South Asian region. In last section, the Pakistan efforts
during invasion was marked the success of US foreign policy and significance of Indian Ocean region.


Robert D Kaplan is a renowned scholar has provided literature particularly portraying the significance of Indian Ocean Region. The writer stressed on western tradition policy in the globe by developing the narrative that Indian Ocean Region has immense role in determining the global scenario. It was largely due to its vast attachment with the four continents. The gulf, south Asian and East Asian link with Australia are the crossroads which contribute more than the Western hemisphere for the formulation of world order. The writer has focused on the South Asian sphere as game changer by pointing out the importance Gawadar as a Dubai which is undermine by the political instability.

In the last section of the book, he argues about the emergence of post-western world is inevitable, adding that the Indian Ocean will be the first region where this new situation becomes visible. The US should then seek to assume the role of a balancer between the region’s most powerful actors. At the same time, Kaplan recognizes that the US dominance will continue for some time, for example by pointing out that US still possess more than half of the world’ aircraft carriers.


2012.

The authors have analyzed and defined the Indian Ocean strategy of the U.S. as there is, now, a growing awareness of the Indian Ocean in the US, Australia and Japan. In this article, there are three focuses of US interest as
listed below. Firstly, the Indian Ocean is important to maintain as a secure highway for international commerce. Secondly, there are strategic choke points of the Indian Ocean highway in the Strait of Hormuz on one end and the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea on the other. Considering there is crisis with Iran and China, these areas are of more immediate concern for the US. Thirdly, the Indian Ocean is likely to remain the main arena of Sino-Indian Competition in the long run or at least in near future.

The authors have also analyzed how these three US interests should be dealt with while at the same time analyzing their seriousness. In this review, I will first summarize the main points of the article, followed by expressing my opinion about why Japan and U.S. are presently interested in the Indian Ocean.


This article has provided the speech of Ashley J. Tellis at National Maritime Foundation. The writer has divided his arguments into three parts. He has described the traditional significance of Indian Ocean Region by exploring the geostrategic location of the region. Moving ahead, Tellis has given the view that the future trends in Indian Ocean Region are being challenging due to massive dependence of major powers of the world. In the final section of the text writer has provided the grand strategy of United States as ambiguous and disrespectful to the region at large. It provided the unilateral order of US in the regional trends and transformation.


Discussion

Economic Dimensions

“The Indian Ocean provides major sea routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. It carries a particularly heavy traffic of petroleum and petroleum products from the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and Indonesia. Its fish are of great and growing importance to the bordering countries for domestic consumption and export. Fishing fleets from Russia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan also exploit the Indian Ocean, mainly for shrimp and tuna. Large reserves of hydrocarbons are being tapped in the offshore areas of Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and Western Australia. An estimated 40% of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean. Beach sands rich in heavy minerals and offshore placer deposits are actively exploited by bordering countries, particularly India, South Africa, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The everlasting hegemony of United States, after the Cold War, is being challenged by the emerging powers in regional arena in shape of India and China as global markets. To ensure their economic routes, both have joint as well as unilateral naval exercises to guard the maritime routes. This bipolar regional challenge is posing a major security consciousness to USA and its allies in the Indian Ocean Region. “One of the biggest Challenges USA is facing in the world politics is in

⁴ https://www.reddit.com/domain/theworldoceans.com/
the Indian Ocean where both China and India are emerging as the major maritime and economic powers and posing challenge to USA’s many decades long hegemony.”

The reciprocity is followed by the extensive involvement and doctrinal reformation by the United States to undermine the India and China’s naval policies. “The task of the U.S. Navy will therefore be to quietly leverage the sea power of its closest allies India in the Indian Ocean and Japan in the western Pacific to set limits on China’s expansion. One of the major aims of USA is to reduce and slow down the increasing Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the regional countries and excite the areas of conflict. As it is obvious, USA is exciting regional states interests to obstruct China’s expansion in the South China Sea as well as in East China Sea to limit Chinese FDI and push countries away from Chinese Camp. USA does not want the region to be dominated by any single state because that would seriously endanger USA’s long term economic interests as well as disturb the balance of power in the region.”

Another striking dilemma is 90% of commercial trading goods are trading on seas with containers due to which Indian Ocean became the center of the world. It is assumed that till 2035 world will consume 50% more hydrocarbons and the trade route through hydrocarbons are to

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6 http://www.phantomreport.com/
be shipped is Indian Ocean. China is moving vertically south towards Indian Ocean, while India is moving towards east and west along the Indian Ocean. China is developing harbor facilities in Gawadar Pakistan, near to strait of Hormus Iran, Chitagong Eastern part of Bangladesh, Burma. Struggle of major powers for natural gas deposits in Burma, strategic minerals, uranium, timber and hydrocarbons creates not only volatile situation and realpolitik confrontation in region but also civil war dilemma to Burma.

**Political Dimensions**

The United States has been swirling the patterns of Indian Ocean region for the cultivation of its sphere of influence after the revolution of decolonization. The Political perspective of United States can be assumed by two major goals. First goal is to limit the Russian and Chinese Influence in the region but the Russian diplomacy aiming to weaken the traditional influence through combination of diplomatic military and economic instruments has generated insecurity of United States. The attempt of Russian influence in the region was considered as a destabilizing factor and an emerging threat to US. The provisions for the measurement of fears and threats from the regional actor have been significant in the declaratory policy of USA. The second political objective centers on the notion of stability which might be identified with political harmony in friendly states and
intra-regional balance. US policy is assumed to be realistic in the region because to accomplish the ruling interest of the regime.

“Political changes repeatedly can be seen still US political interest is preserved and political status quo is protected where substantial US interest is involved, that is why US has always been supportive to authoritative regimes.”

US policies have tended to rely on the military components in both the stability of domestic political orders and intra-regional balance. Unfortunately immature nationalism in South Asia benefits US to achieve goals of political nature by indulging different inter-groups and intra-groups into various conflict zones. US have invariable missionary foreign policy either democrats or republicans rule, the end goal of foreign policy is to spread liberal democracy in economic system.

The forces which contributed for global hegemonic framework in Indian Ocean Region scenarios are supported by Indian favor to United States. To protect vital United States interest in the region, she has established a pattern of integration with the Indian society within and outside the world view of American nation. They have signed number of MoUs as well as cultural exchange programs to make this bond stronger. It has affected the Chinese regional role as a major power. “Being an important actor of the South Asian politics US Deepened political engagement

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7RasulBuxRais“The Indian Ocean and the Superpowers.” (Publication Date: March 1, 1987).
with India is critical to both an enhanced security partnership and to India’s ability to play the regional and global roles that the United States seeks. In recent years as India has aligned itself in unprecedented ways with US policies and actions in or near its own region as in its support for US military involvement in Afghanistan and its votes in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for sanctions against Iran despite its long and multifaceted relations with that country. Indian foreign policy has traditionally centered on its regional interests, while the United States has pursued global interests.”

In 2001, 2008 India and Pakistan were at brink of war, tensions across the borders and war drums were getting louder and louder whereas US was engaged in Afghanistan bombing campaign, in such scenario US has played a vital role to normalize the intensive situations because to safeguard its political objective in the region. US made Pakistan and Afghanistan as driving engine to accomplish political objective while being in the buffer zone of South Asia. Americans are thinking that how can we leave from Afghanistan; Chinese are thinking to settle themself in Afghanistan. It is struggle for power due to strategic minerals, metal minerals having millions-trillions of worth under the surface of Afghanistan.

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8 http://www.cnas.org/
The Americans wanted Afghanistan to be semi-stabilize and to stabilize Pakistan; this will not be a victory of America, Victory goes to China will further strengthen Chinese string of pearls project.

**Strategic Dimensions**

The strategic competition occupies the most significant dynamics of Indian Ocean in contemporary global arena. The immense naval exercises between regional and global players are becoming the trends strategic competition.

“The Indian Ocean became the strategic hub because of the presence of conventional and nuclear vessels of the major powers in the area, its importance can be further magnified by looking into its security dilemma because of the presence of major powers in the region and potential of the regional powers, three being nuclear powered.”

The strategic competition is based on the realist view of security in which the steps taken by one actor are considered as insecurity based on security dilemma. It comprised the perspective of your security as my insecurity. This conception is

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being translated in the major powers along with their allies like U.S.A., China, Pakistan and India. The stands against each other’s race guided by the vital national interests of each. “The Indian Ocean area will be the true nexus of world powers and conflict in the coming years. It is here that the fight for democracy, energy independence and religious freedom will be lost or won.”

By looking at the security concerns, the involved actors are very keen to ensure their security in broader regional context. The major actors in Indian Ocean have developed the eventual balance of power in conventional and non-conventional weaponries deployment in the unique body of water. The development of Diego Garcia as a strong naval military base to monitor the navigation of international players including state and non-state actor from the coasts of Africa to Australia and broaderly West and South Asian region to eastern littoral states. This deployment, having the clear identification of security umbrella of regional hegemon, provided an immense challenge to the major actors like China and India. The U.S.A. has shifted the policy in earlier this decade by addressing the economic and security posture as in one unit in which the Chinese and Iranian role was considered as major threat which could be protected by extending the maritime partnership. This will be the outcome of economic Modi in Indian sphere has provided India a policy shift and mapping its own design on the foot prints of

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Indian Ocean Region by adopting a new policy influenced by kautilian real politik. India has recently exercised its naval forces with Maldives and Mauritius which clear states the contesting future between three major players in Indian Ocean. “The Indo-US collusion in the Indian Ocean has made Pakistan and China wary of their semi-hostile overtures, hence ensuing strategic competition in the region and employment of resource-dependent strategies to counteract and counterbalance the enemy state’s maneuvers.”

The United States presence in the region is in shape of different choke points in the center of Ocean, at Diego Garcia, has an assertive outcome for India as well as China. In case of India this burden is bearable because the India and United States have more common objective as they have the common enemy China. This is posing a major challenge to China who has been pursuing the larger interests than both India and US. However, China has been rising in passive and peaceful manner and is not likely to adopt an aggressive behavior. It has introduced the maritime silk route to guard its interest’s broaderly in defensive as well as offensive measures if needed. This was marked as “String of Pearls” by other powers. The Wi Qie conceptions have guided the Chinese mind set in pacific manners to deter the hegemonic designs of both Indo-US challenges jointly. Furthermore, the One-

\[1\]Ibid.
Belt, One-Road is an extension of this cognition to mitigate the sphere of influence of other actors in this contest.

In next 10-15 years china will be ahead of US naval strength, designing submarine, missiles to hit moving targets, cyber hit capable missiles, which create huge barriers for US naval ambitions.

**Findings**

Following are the core findings of my research:

- The major actors in Indian Ocean Regiona are U.S.A., China, and India has vital economic, geostrategic, and geopolitical interests in the Ocean.
- All the actors hold contradictory designs to ensure their particular interests which clearly will lead to a contesting future of great game debate in Middle East and Central Asia.
- The decision makers of major powers are guided by the tradition concepts of their particular society which is not parallel to the modern academic theoretical frameworks.
- Their exists the balance of power among major actor in the region which ensure the status quo.
Conclusion

The inconsistency in policies of regional actors like India, Pakistan and Gulf states has opened the theatre for great powers to stage Indian Ocean Region as contesting platform. One the other hand, the cultivation of Islamic extremism by great powers has deeply affected the peace of South Asian and Middle Eastern littoral particularly which is being followed at global arena in shape of transnational terrorism. The policy failure of United States in the past has dragged the regional contestant to this verge that they are deeply skeptic of the nature of their policies in peace times. The status quo oriented policies are not visualized by the major powers instead they are following more aggressive designs. The demand of the region is that all the major powers and stakeholders should seek the revisits of their policies by focusing on common goals.

The above mentioned economic, political and strategic reasons of America’s interest in Indian Ocean do validate the notion that, a maritime strategy aimed to project a long term American hegemony, has thus become largely vital. India’s economic boom and its rise as a major player in Asian politics and China’s new policy of naval power projection do provoke American policy makers to consider the strategic importance of Indian Ocean. Moreover, America’s extended strategic partnership with the Asian rising power India rightly indicates the level of American interest in Indian Ocean. I will conclude my paper with some words of
Robert D Kaplan that “the Indian Ocean area will be the true nexus of world powers and conflict in the coming years. It is here that the fight for democracy, energy independence and religious freedom will be lost or won.”