CROSS CURRENTS

THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

EDITED BY DAVID BREWSTER, SAMUEL BASHFIELD, AND JUSTIN BURKE

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For James Goldrick (1958–2023),
an enduring beacon to maritime thinkers.

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Contents

Contributors vii

Foreword xv
The Hon Julie Bishop

Introduction 1
David Brewster

Chapter 1 15
US naval strategy in the Indian Ocean
Nilanthi Samaranayake

Chapter 2 31
Indian naval strategy and China
Sudarshan Shrikhande

Chapter 3 51
China's future military presence in the Indian Ocean: interests and imperatives
Joshua T. White

Chapter 4 73
Australian maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean
James Goldrick

Chapter 5 89
A US perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean
Dr Brendan S. Mulvaney

Chapter 6 107
An Indian perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean
M. Matheswaran

Chapter 7 127
New strategic imperatives for air and space power in the Indian Ocean region: an Australian perspective
Peter Hunter

Chapter 8 137
The littoral seam: the littoral operating environment and future of amphibious power in the Indian Ocean
Peter J. Dean

Chapter 9 155
Australia as an active middle power in the Indian Ocean
Rory Medcalf

Chapter 10 173
The Indian Ocean in France's Indo-Pacific pivot
Marianne Peron-Doise

Chapter 11 189
South Africa: balancing priorities and relationships in the Indian Ocean
Francois Vreÿ and Mark Blaine

Chapter 12 207
Indonesia's ambivalence as an Indian Ocean power
Premesha Saha and Natalie Sambhi

Chapter 13 229
The agency of Indian Ocean island states
Derek McDougall and Pradeep Taneja

Chapter 14 245
Sri Lanka between the major powers: a retreat from non-alignment?
Barana Waidyatilake, Malinda Meegoda and Dinusha Panditaratne

Chapter 15 257
Seychelles: the engagement of a small island state with major powers in the Indian Ocean
Dennis Hardy

Conclusion 271
Understanding the Indian Ocean's strategic future as part of the Indo-Pacific
David Brewster and Rory Medcalf

Index 282

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Foreword
The Hon Julie Bishop

Chancellor of the Australian National University
Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2013–2018

Australia is bounded east and west by two of the world's great oceans, the Pacific and the Indian. Yet often our policy attention – in economics, security and foreign affairs – has traditionally focused more heavily on the Pacific. As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I encouraged us to refocus our outlook and to integrate the Indian Ocean with the Asia-Pacific and think in truly Indo-Pacific terms. This was captured in our 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, building on earlier efforts by other Federal Cabinet Ministers from Western Australia, who were influenced by their west coast outlook. However, it is fair to say that the Indian Ocean part of our foreign policy remains a work in progress.

We have the largest maritime jurisdiction of any state in the Indian Ocean, and most of Australia's exports traverse those waters at some point. In recent years, Australia has been increasing its engagement in the Indian Ocean, influenced by the logic of developing truly strategic relations with India and based on the recognition that these waters are becoming central to economic connectivity, as well as security competition across the wider Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, the region is experiencing considerable economic dynamism with India as the largest economy joined by several emerging, high-growth economies, including Indonesia, Bangladesh and several East African states. Over time, we should expect that these nations will begin to play a more significant economic, political and security role in the region. So, while our India relationship is to be nurtured and celebrated, Australia needs to think of the Indian Ocean as a place of multipolarity – and therein lies opportunity.

Some of the elements of this more nuanced Indian Ocean policy are in place. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper reaffirmed Australia's commitment to a rules-based international order and identified cooperation with India as a key element in Australia's approach to the Indian Ocean. Its focus on 'small groups' of likeminded countries also paved the way for the revival of the Quad. We also reinvigorated regional multilateral arrangements. Australia worked with India and other partners to revive and refocus the Indian Ocean Rim Association to address six key areas: maritime

safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk management; academic and science and technology cooperation; and tourism and cultural exchanges. These included the fields of education through soft power and people-to-people diplomacy. The New Colombo Plan was based on a vision of engagement that included South Asia in Australia's regional focus.

In addition to multilateral engagement, Australia also began enhancing mini-lateral arrangements with small groups of key regional partners. The Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral relationship was developed through senior official meetings focused on shared concerns on maritime security. This was raised to foreign minister level in 2020. From early 2018, steps were also taken to develop the Australia-India-France trilateral relationship as three Indian Ocean states with substantial capabilities in maritime security. While the Australia-France relationship has been adversely affected by the 2021 cancellation of the submarine contract, the underlying imperatives for cooperation among the three countries remain. The new AUKUS partnership to include the building of nuclear-powered submarines with the United Kingdom and the United States had a controversial start, however it also reinforces engagement by those powers in the Indo-Pacific. This may well have a particular bearing on the Indian Ocean, where Australia's main submarine base is located.

With all this in mind, the merits of this volume are clear. It involves a comprehensive collection of perspectives from many of the world's foremost scholars on Indian Ocean issues, brought together in a project led by NSC at the Australian National University and supported by a strategic policy research grant from the Department of Defence. The themes define security in its broadest sense, spanning foreign policy, military power, economics and the social and environmental dimensions often overlooked in more traditional writings on international relations.

This collection also usefully rebalances the strategic conversation to recognise that the stability and prosperity of the Indian Ocean, and the wider Indo-Pacific, will involve the capabilities, interests and agency of many nations. A particular strength of this survey is its focus on the future and several plausible trajectories for the region. I am confident that this book will be an enduring resource for understanding the challenges and opportunities of a region that has become pivotal in global affairs in the 21st century.

Perth, Western Australia

Introduction

DAVID BREWSTER

After several decades of United States predominance, the Indian Ocean is now becoming a much more complex, congested, and contested strategic space. Key drivers of this changing strategic environment include a relative decline in US military dominance, the emergence of India as a major regional power, and China's growing economic and military presence. This transition in the relative strengths of the major powers is likely to produce a more multipolar region than seen before in the modern era, with a much greater level of strategic competition.

The implications of a more multipolar balance of power for the region are not at all clear. A more multipolar Indian Ocean, involving the interaction of several major powers, could produce different outcomes, including long-running strategic instability or some new form of dynamic stability. A multipolar region may also mean that the region's resident middle powers (including, among others, Australia, France, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and South Africa) as well as extra-regional players such as Japan, the United Kingdom, and Russia could play a greater role than in the past, pursuing their own interests either alone or in coalition with others. Smaller or relatively weaker states will also be significantly affected by a changing balance of power. They will find it difficult to escape the impact of strategic competition or instability: the less fortunate may be suborned or become the objects of major power competition, while the more fortunate may retain sufficient agency to pursue their own interests.

This volume brings together leading analysts from Australia, India, the US, France, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles to consider possible strategic futures for the Indian Ocean in light of these developments. This introduction will provide an overview of the changing balance of power among the major powers of the region: the US, India and China. It will then focus on the changing roles of key resident middle players, established and emerging. It will consider the consequences of these developments for the island states and territories as they seek to mitigate the adverse impact of strategic competition, while maximising their own agency. Last, it will

consider how we should understand Indian Ocean dynamics as part of the broader Indo-Pacific construct.

The changing balance among the major powers

Relative decline in US predominance

The US has been the predominant power in the Indian Ocean for more than four decades, and will most likely remain the strongest power for years to come, even as its relative lead diminishes. But there are many uncertainties about the US role in the region, and not just those that were caused by vagaries of the first Trump administration or the disruptive impact of the second.

Washington's strategic focus in the Indian Ocean is, and always has been, centred on its interests in the Persian Gulf, with the remainder of the region being of only secondary interest. The US has long considered the Indian Ocean as a highway to and from the Persian Gulf region, but it has otherwise shown relatively little interest in building an effective region-wide architecture that could help provide stability and support international norms such as freedom of the seas. As discussed in chapter 1 (US naval strategy in the Indian Ocean), the US has important interests in the Indian Ocean, including upholding the free flow of commerce and international norms and maintaining continued military access to the region. But in an era of major power competition with China and Russia, it is ultimately a secondary priority for Washington compared with the Pacific and other areas.

One might argue that, aside from the Persian Gulf area, the Indian Ocean is essentially an economy-of-force region, and the US strategic preference will be to prevent the Indian Ocean from becoming a priority theatre that makes greater demands on US defence resources. Washington may therefore be cautious about unnecessarily inciting greater competition with China in that theatre, whether through its own actions or those of partners such as India.

How these considerations could affect the balance of power in the region may depend on factors that are in or outside Washington's control, including events elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. The relative transience of the current US military predominance in the Indian Ocean could become apparent relatively quickly, for example, if there are significant calls on US defence resources elsewhere that override US interests in the Indian Ocean theatre.

For one thing, the significantly reduced US dependence on Persian Gulf oil has the potential to fundamentally alter the US defence commitment to the Indian Ocean. Future US administrations might not always feel compelled to protect energy being exported to China or other countries. Washington may, for example, conclude that whatever benefits (often involving demonstrations of status) that might accrue

from US military dominance of the Gulf are outweighed by the huge and very measurable financial costs, and that the US has more pressing strategic priorities in the Pacific or elsewhere.

Second, after almost 20 years of involvement in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria, the US will be under increasing pressure to redeploy defence resources from West Asia to the Pacific. Although the Biden administration's review of the US military global posture in 2021 made relatively few public adjustments in the Gulf, these pressures could increase significantly if Chinese threats to Taiwan or elsewhere in the Pacific were to rise. Any significant reduction in the US military presence in the Gulf, or a significant erosion of US credibility as a security provider, could spark a period of intense strategic competition as China, India, and other countries move to fill any perceived power vacuum. Such competition would likely have a knock-on effect right across the Indian Ocean.

The nature of the US regional defence presence will also be affected by changing understandings of the Indo-Pacific as an interdependent strategic space. For decades, the US military has been, separately, forward deployed in the Pacific and the Persian Gulf. The traditional understanding of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as independent and largely strategically unrelated theatres has effectively made US Central Command and US Indo-Pacific Command competitors for US defence resources. But a growing understanding of the Indo-Pacific as essentially a single operational theatre may facilitate new US strategies that, for example, place greater emphasis on swinging defence resources from the Pacific theatre into the Indian Ocean in response to particular threats or crises. In the Indian Ocean this could reduce the burden of maintaining large forward deployments in the Persian Gulf, but could also place greater strain on US partnerships in the region, as Washington places more pressure on its partners to take greater responsibility for regional security.

These considerations mean that Washington is increasingly focusing on cooperation with, and capability building of, regional partners to take the strain off limited US defence resources. The need for regional partners is a key reason why the US has made considerable efforts to partner with India and help build its military capabilities.[1] The AUKUS security partnership, announced in September 2021, involves the sharing of nuclear submarine and other advanced defence technology among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US. It is thus intended to strengthen Australian capabilities and better coordinate the activities of the three allies in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. Other new so-called 'minilaterals' focus more on the western Pacific, but nonetheless improve prospects for burden-sharing across the wider region. These include the JAKUS arrangement among Japan, South Korea and the US, and the so-called 'Squad', a quadrilateral arrangement of the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines. Meanwhile, the original Quad (or

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) – involving the US, Japan, Australia and India – has a comprehensively Indo-Pacific remit, although places most of its public emphasis on provision of public goods (such as health services, disaster relief and maritime domain awareness), rather than military security.

The emergence of India as a major regional power

A second major change in regional dynamics comes from the emergence of India as the largest economy and biggest military power among Indian Ocean states. India has long harboured ambitions to be recognised as the leading Indian Ocean power, with special security responsibilities in the region. Since achieving independence in 1947, India has shown a strong aversion to the presence of other major powers in the Indian Ocean, although previously it had few abilities to do anything about it. Those concerns were once directed at the US, but are now very much directed at China. As a result, strategic competition between India and China is likely to become an increasingly important factor in the region's dynamics.

In the past, India's aspirations (and accompanying rhetoric) have frequently outrun its material power. India has one of the largest military establishments in the world, including an army of some 1.2 million active personnel and 960,000 reserves. However, its ability to project power much beyond South Asia is severely constrained by deficiencies in equipment and a prevailingly defensive strategic culture.[2] Its army and air force are almost wholly focused on defending its northern and western frontiers, reflecting land-based threats from China and Pakistan. The Indian Navy receives only a small proportion of the total defence budget and its role may be further constrained by a recent reorganisation that effectively puts the army in control of the Indian armed forces. However, the US is encouraging India to play a broader regional role, including through transfers of defence technology and intelligence sharing.

With some exceptions, India is generally seen among regional states as a relatively benign player compared with other major powers, meaning that it has positive political relationships in the region. Since independence, India has prioritised its regional relationships with its immediate neighbours in South Asia. But since 2014, India has sought to enhance connections with other Indian Ocean states, including through its SAGAR initiative (Security and Growth for All in the Region) that includes capability building and infrastructure projects. However, institutional weaknesses have constrained India's ability to mobilise economic resources to extend its influence around the region as compared with rivals such as China.

One of the biggest changes in India's strategic posture has been its willingness to develop new bilateral alignments with the US and other partners in order to leverage its position vis-à-vis China. The most significant bilateral alignment for the Indian Ocean is with the US, but this is accompanied by enhanced defence relationships

with Japan, France, Australia and others. This represents a significant break from India's past policies of non-alignment.

As part of this realignment, India is also joining the growing web of minilateral groupings, the most well-known being the aforementioned Quad. For a long time, the Quad developed slowly as a grouping, but since 2020 it has been given a significant boost by China's growing assertiveness across the region, and particularly China's border incursions in the Himalayas. This impetus propelled India into broad-based cooperation with its Quad partners in areas such as naval exercises, infrastructure investment, supply chain resilience, rare earth minerals, cyber, and technology. In the Indian Ocean, the Quad provides a broad framework for cooperation among the four countries across a wide spectrum of security-related issues and in engagement with regional states. The Quad is supplemented by several trilateral groupings such as Australia-India-Indonesia and Australia-India-France that bring together partners to discuss issues of common interest in the Indian Ocean.

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean

In the long term, a fundamental change in the Indian Ocean balance of power will come from China's growing presence. Beijing has important strategic interests in the Indian Ocean that are likely to drive an ever-greater Chinese military presence in coming years.

It is widely understood that China's most crucial interest is the protection of its trading routes, over which a majority of its imported oil needs are transported from the Middle East and Africa. These sea lanes are highly vulnerable to threats from state and non-state adversaries, especially at the maritime chokepoints of the Strait of Hormuz and Malacca Strait. But as discussed in chapter 3 (China's future military presence in the Indian Ocean: interests and imperatives), China also has other important strategic interests in the region, including a growing number of Chinese nationals and investments related to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The imperative to protect people and assets is likely to become an increasingly important driver in China's military presence across the region.

The opening of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 to support anti-piracy operations and facilitate the protection of China's interests in Africa indicates that its military presence is likely to grow to meet its strategic needs. This is likely to include a significantly expanded naval presence. Increased naval deployments would likely be accompanied by permanent deployments of contingents of Chinese marines and other supporting services.[3] This may significantly constrain the relative freedom of action that US forces currently enjoy in the region.

China's principal security focus to date has been in the western Indian Ocean, but it is also becoming active in the eastern Indian Ocean, including through annual

naval exercises near Australia's Christmas Island since 2014. In the future, China may also seek to establish a naval support facility in the eastern Indian Ocean in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, or Bangladesh.

The BRI is China's flagship initiative in the region, and involves building new pathways across the Indian Ocean Region, both on land and at sea. The Maritime Silk Road, which is the maritime leg of the BRI, involves building a network of ports that will be available to China in many parts of the region. These include Djibouti, where China has already established a naval base, and potentially also at locations such as Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), and Bagamoyo (Tanzania). The ports could potentially facilitate a large and sustained presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy in the Indian Ocean, with considerable implications for the regional balance of power.

Perhaps even more significant is the development of new overland transport routes and economic corridors between China and the sea, from China's southern Yunnan Province across Myanmar to the new port of Kyaukpyu, and from its western Xinjiang Province across Pakistan to the port of Gwadar. These overland connections, including roads, railways and pipelines, will mean that, for the first time in history, significant numbers of people and goods (and, potentially, armies) will be able to move directly between Chinese territory and the waters of the Indian Ocean.

These developments through the BRI have several consequences. One will be to entrench China's economic power in the region. As former Australian Foreign Secretary, Peter Varghese, commented:

> What BRI does is place China at the centre of economic activity and strengthen its resource supply lines. China is not a classic imperial power but, like the Romans, it understands that a road system can underpin an empire's economic and strategic power.[4]

Another consequence of the BRI is that it may, for the first time ever, effectively make China a *resident* power of the Indian Ocean, which could fundamentally change the nature of China's relationships in the region. In the past, China's interests in the Indian Ocean and its relationships with its Indian Ocean neighbours were naturally limited by the impenetrable wall of the Himalayas and the long sea distances to the Indian Ocean from China's Pacific Ocean ports. But the new direct overland connections being built between China and the Indian Ocean, involving large numbers of Chinese workers and major Chinese investments, will cause China's security interests in the region to multiply.[5]

Consistent with this, we are seeing the steady growth of China's security interests in Pakistan, where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will carve a series of new transport corridors across Pakistan to the ocean. CPEC may also involve the

relocation of thousands of Chinese nationals to Pakistan. China is also developing its security relationships in Myanmar, both with the central government and local provinces, where it has important assets.

There is a significant chance that these people and investments may ultimately need Chinese military protection from potential threats if local security forces are inadequate. China has already deployed a contingent of marines to Djibouti to protect Chinese nationals and investments in Africa, with further deployments expected elsewhere in the region.

The adverse financial consequences of BRI involvement for some Indian Ocean states are also becoming apparent. China has come under criticism for engaging in so-called 'debt trap' diplomacy with some economically vulnerable countries in the region. According to the BRI's critics, Beijing is encouraging countries to become economically dependent on China through promoting economically unfeasible projects involving opaque and exclusive contracts, predatory lending practices, and corruption. Pakistan is already seeing the consequences of unsustainable indebtedness incurred in some projects that are part of the CPEC initiative.[6] When Pakistan suffered a balance of payments crisis in 2023, this indebtedness had to be rescheduled, likely further expanding China's influence there.

Sri Lanka has also experienced the consequences of entering into financially unfeasible BRI projects, such as the development of a new port at Hambantota. When the debt incurred for building the port could not be repaid, Sri Lanka was forced to hand over control of the port to China under a 99-year lease. Sri Lanka's indebtedness, including to China, was a significant factor in its acute economic crisis in 2022.

Regardless of the criticisms and setbacks to the BRI, there is every reason to believe that China will continue to expand its economic, political and military role in the Indian Ocean, and that this will drive a complex dynamic of change among other nations.

Strategic competition among the major powers

In the Pacific theatre, the US and China are seen as the principal strategic competitors, but the dynamics are somewhat different in the Indian Ocean, where major power competition is at its sharpest between India and China.

As noted, Delhi sees China's growing economic, political and military presence in the Indian Ocean as creating a fundamental challenge to its ambitions to be recognised as a leading power in the Indian Ocean. Delhi views China's presence in South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean with particular suspicion and anxiety. China's growing relationships with countries in the region are not perceived as being a legitimate reflection of Chinese interests, but as being directed against India, to encircle it or keep it off balance.

Beijing takes a quite different view from Delhi on the legitimacy of its presence in the Indian Ocean. Many Chinese strategists believe that India lacks the comprehensive national power needed to rank as a first-tier power in Asia, and that it will not be able to provide security across the Indian Ocean. Beijing also strongly resists any suggestion that India has any right to restrict China's relationships in the region. As a result, Beijing pays little heed to Indian sensitivities about those relationships. Some argue that China suffers from a strategic 'blind spot' in understanding the perspectives of its neighbours, particularly India, and does not understand the anxieties that it is creating across the Indo-Pacific.[7] This negative dynamic is exacerbated by China's BRI. Beijing claims that its BRI projects are purely economic and that it does not need India as a partner. This only fuels Indian suspicions that the BRI is part of a Chinese strategy to dominate the region.

Over the past few years, strategic competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean has grown and has included a race between them to seek control over, or access to, ports and airfields: for China, in locations such Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota, and Kyaukpyu and for India, in Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Iran, Oman, and Indonesia. This competition increasingly involves jostling between the two countries for political influence in smaller or weaker countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives. More than once this competition has been a factor in domestic political upheavals, where India and China have each backed factions seen as more favourable to themselves.[8]

If the fighting between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army in the Himalayas in 2020 is any indication, it is more likely than not that competition between India and China will continue to grow. Overt competition, or the risk of conflict, in the Indian Ocean maritime space is currently partly dampened by US naval predominance. But were the US presence to decline significantly, then Sino-Indian competition could become far more overt and intense.

Much of the focus has been on growing naval competition and its impact on the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) across the Indian Ocean, particularly the SLOCs over which energy is transported from the Persian Gulf to China and other countries in East Asia. Some Indian strategists believe that in the event of a conflict between India and China in the Himalayas, India could leverage China's vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean by interdicting or blockading China's maritime trade.[9] As discussed in chapter 2 (Indian naval strategy and China) however, there are considerable doubts about the effectiveness or wisdom of a trade interdiction strategy. Indeed, threats to interdict Chinese trade could be self-defeating by unnecessarily provoking a Chinese naval build-up in the region. Washington would be likely to see such a result as contrary to its interests in limiting strategic competition in the Indian Ocean.

But the balance of air power in the Indian Ocean is in many ways just as important as the naval balance. As discussed in chapter 5 (A US perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean), the PLA has significant deficiencies in its ability to conduct long-range operations, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region, including the lack of a robust air-to-air refuelling capacity. This may drive relatively greater reliance on alternatives to conventional aircraft such as missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and the space domain. For the US, it means greater reliance on regional partners, including to ensure access for US air power to swing into the region in response to events. As discussed in chapter 6 (An Indian perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean), while the Indian Air Force is in the process of modernisation, it has serious deficiencies in its ability to project power throughout the region.

In considering the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, we also need to understand the significance of the so-called 'littoral seam'. Chapter 8 (The littoral seam: the littoral operating environment and future of amphibious power in the Indian Ocean) considers the re-emergence of littoral warfare as a key focus area of major power competition and potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific and the broad applicability and importance of amphibious capabilities in the Indian Ocean littorals. That chapter examines the role of anti-access, area denial (A2AD) technology and China's vulnerabilities as it moves from a posture of denying the US in the western Pacific to force projection in the Indian Ocean.

Whether or not there is outright conflict between them in the future, we are likely to see ever more jostling for influence between India and China across the Indian Ocean. Strategic competition between those countries may lead to the greater militarisation of the region, as India feels impelled to respond to China's moves. This will likely make the Indian Ocean a much more complex and difficult strategic environment than it has been for many decades.

It should not be taken for granted that India will progressively assume a benign regional leadership role consistent with Delhi's rhetoric and Washington's hopes, and indeed there remain considerable uncertainties about its future military role. It is plausible that the Indian military's prioritisation of land-based threats could leave its navy in a position where it is unable to credibly respond to maritime threats from China, leaving Delhi only with political or diplomatic options. It is equally plausible that perceived Chinese encroachments could lead to disproportionate responses from India as it seeks to defend its 'turf'. These outcomes could place considerable pressure on the coalition of India, the US and its allies.

The growing role of middle powers

The changing balance between the major powers is being complemented by the greater presence and activities of the middle powers in the Indian Ocean. These include

established regional powers such as Australia, France, South Africa, as well as emerging economies such as Indonesia and Bangladesh. In coming decades, they may be joined by large, fast-growing East African countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania.

Australia is an active middle power with significant interests in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East and has among the most capable navies in the region. As examined in chapter 4 (Australian maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean), the complexity of the Indian Ocean and the wide range of maritime challenges faced there will require Australia to increasingly rely on relationships with the region's actors, most critically India, while also sustaining its complex relationship with the US. As discussed in chapter 7 (New strategic imperatives for air and space power in the Indian Ocean region: an Australian perspective), evolving grey-zone tactics used by actors such as China will also require innovative responses.

On a policy level, chapter 9 (Australia as an active middle power in the Indian Ocean) also highlights the need for Canberra to craft an Indian Ocean policy that is more holistic and active (indeed activist) than hitherto: not merely reactive, issue-specific, or overridingly India-focused. Ideally, this policy would amount to an Indian Ocean strategy, embedded in a wider and whole-of-government Indo-Pacific strategy.

France has long had a large military presence in the region in connection with its Indian Ocean departments and territories. As discussed in chapter 10 (The Indian Ocean in France's Indo-Pacific pivot), France now approaches its security role in the Indian Ocean as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Paris sees itself as a sovereign actor in the region due to its island territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. France's strategic presence is characterised by a preference towards hard power through defence diplomacy and operational partnerships, particularly with regional partners such as India and Australia (although its relationship with the latter has come under strain following Australia's 2021 cancellation of a French submarine contract in favour of AUKUS). France also pursues a 'soft' security agenda through inclusive maritime multilateralism via Blue Economy initiatives and supporting European maritime capacity building.

South Africa has also long been seen as a potentially important player in the Indian Ocean, but as chapter 11 (South Africa: balancing priorities and relationships in the Indian Ocean) makes clear, in practice it is subject to considerable material and ideological constraints. In fact, South Africa's widely regarded status as an emergent middle power in the Indian Ocean is not matched by its capabilities or its priorities. The country strongly prioritises its continental relationships and interests in Africa and as a matter of policy is also firmly wedded to using multilateral mechanisms as its vehicles for regional engagement. In the case of the Indian Ocean, multilateral mechanisms tend to be very weak, which may have the effect of constraining South Africa's potential influence.

Indonesia has particular significance for Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. As discussed in chapter 12 (Indonesia's ambivalence as an Indian Ocean power), through the 20th century it largely turned its back on the Indian Ocean, giving its attention to Southeast Asia and further north. In 2014, President Joko Widodo's announcement of a 'global maritime fulcrum' strategy highlighted Indonesia's awareness of its strategic position at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, the strategy was poorly implemented, and the maritime policy direction under his successor, Prabowo Subianto, remains unclear. As that chapter concludes, Indonesia's potential must be tempered by an understanding of real constraints. Indonesia may have a relatively credible claim as a player of influence in the Indian Ocean Region; however, it cannot yet assume a role as a maritime power. If Indonesia one day desires to become an Indian Ocean maritime power, it must clearly define what kind of a power it wants to be, show intent in doing so, develop requisite capabilities for its defined role, and then demonstrate leadership as a security guarantor and norms developer.

Other extra-regional powers are also becoming increasingly active in the Indian Ocean. These include Japan, whose sustained Indo-Pacific outlook, introduced under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has facilitated a comprehensive engagement in the Indian Ocean. This includes political and economic engagement with most states in the region, including extensive infrastructure investments funded by Japanese aid agencies. Japan has even developed a small military presence, including maritime air patrol assets based out of Djibouti. Although Japan does not aspire to be a major player in the Indian Ocean, it hopes to mitigate China's growing influence in the region, in partnership with India and other Quad countries.

The United Kingdom has also signalled its intention to return as a significant player in the Indian Ocean, alone and in conjunction with partners such as Australia and the US, including through the AUKUS arrangement. The late 2024 announcement of a deal to hand Mauritius sovereignty of the Chagos archipelago should not be interpreted as Britain reducing its interest in the region. The deal arranges for the continued existence of the US air and naval base on Diego Garcia, the most important military facility on any Indian Ocean island. Moreover, Britain is seeking to rebuild a range of regional relationships that have not been prioritised for decades. This may be an ambitious task. The UK's focus on northeast Indian Ocean security aligns with Australia's priorities, suggesting a natural middle-power partnership.

Russia is also returning to the Indian Ocean after being largely absent since the end of the Cold War. Its key areas of focus are in South Asia, where it is seeking to build a new partnership with Pakistan, while maintaining its traditional relationship with India, and in the western Indian Ocean. This includes a growing presence of military

forces and mercenaries associated with the Russian Government. Moscow hopes to leverage this military presence to pursue opportunities for arms sales, investments in the resources sector, and to keep the US off balance.[10] There is potential for it to become increasingly aggressive in pursuing these objectives.

All of these developments point towards the Indian Ocean becoming a much more multipolar and complex strategic environment than at any time in modern history. Middle powers will likely play a much more important role in the regional balance of power than ever before. Countries like Australia and Indonesia are forming regional partnerships to address shared security concerns and mitigate the destabilising effects of major power competition. As the multipolar nature of the region grows, Indian Ocean states may increasingly need to navigate potentially shifting coalitions among different powers in areas of shared interest.

Implications for the islands

The changing balance of power, including growing major power competition, will place many smaller or weaker countries in a difficult position. Major powers such as China and India will likely pursue influence among smaller states for economic gain (e.g. infrastructure investments or resource access), political leverage (e.g. regional legitimacy or alliances), and military purposes (e.g. access to ports, airfields, or bases). The size of the Indian Ocean makes access to military bases a prerequisite for the projection of naval and air power in the region, which enhances the geopolitical importance of some smaller and weaker states, particularly island states. Growing strategic competition is also enhancing the significance of the island territories of larger metropolitan powers (including India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Australia's Cocos Islands) for use as bases or staging points to project naval and air power across the region. Diego Garcia is not the only island base that matters, although were the US ever to lose access to it, the effect on the regional power balance would be profound. We can expect continuous Chinese pressure on Mauritius to water down its commitment on US access.

In many cases, strategic competition can have a significant adverse impact on the political stability or economic development of smaller powers. In recent years, strategic competition between large powers with an eye to these benefits has contributed to the destabilisation of several Indian Ocean states (e.g. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Maldives) and there is every likelihood that this list will grow. However, as argued in chapter 13 (The agency of Indian Ocean island states), we should not consider small states as mere pawns or objects of competition among major powers, and even the smallest of island states have considerable agency. These issues are exemplified by two island states: Sri Lanka, which for some years found itself increasingly drawn into

China's orbit to the detriment of its relationship with India, and Seychelles, which is seeking to renew its Cold War-era successes in balancing between major powers.

Chapter 14 (Sri Lanka between the major powers: a retreat from non-alignment?) argues that there are many reasons for Sri Lanka's increasingly apparent turn to China, which could have the effect of constraining its ability to find a balance between India and China. This shift to China can be explained by long-standing reasons such as China's approach to human rights issues, its 'Buddhist diplomacy' in Sri Lanka, and China's support for rural and southern development, as well as the more recent role of China in addressing Sri Lanka's acute needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. All these gave good reason for Sri Lanka to develop its relationship with China, even if it now must face some difficult consequences.

Seychelles provides an excellent example of how even tiny countries can balance the interests of major powers. Chapter 15 (Seychelles: the engagement of a small island state with major powers in the Indian Ocean) considers how Seychelles, the smallest and least populous state in the region, has long taken advantage of its position as an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' in the vast expanses of the western Indian Ocean. Through deft diplomacy, it was able play off the two superpowers during the Cold War, and Seychelles is now seeking to balance the competing interests of India and China.

Fundamental changes are occurring to the Indian Ocean strategic environment. Over the last decade we have seen growing strategic competition among major powers in the region that will likely worsen in coming years. This is likely to lead to a more turbulent strategic space in which coalitions of major, middle and even smaller powers will pursue their interests alone or in coalitions. Whether this new multipolar environment will lead to worsening instability and confrontation, or some sort of dynamic stability that involves both competition and cooperation within certain bounds, will ultimately depend on a multiplicity of players as well as on developments elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific.

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1

US naval strategy in the Indian Ocean

NILANTHI SAMARANAYAKE[1]

As China continues its rise on the global stage, observers are increasingly raising questions about the implications for the United States' presence in the Indian Ocean. This chapter concludes that the US naval strategy in the Indian Ocean reflects a combination of longstanding requirements and evolving priorities for US national strategy in an era of great power strategic competition between the US and both China and Russia.

This chapter identifies three US objectives. The first two objectives – upholding the free flow of commerce and norms, and maintaining continued military access in the Indian Ocean – will continue to be unchanged given economic interests, operational requirements, and the geographic reality for the US as an extra-regional stakeholder without Indian Ocean territories. The third objective is less intuitive but still critical for US strategy. Due to the increased importance of the combined Pacific-Arctic-Atlantic theatre in the era of great power competition, US policymakers will need to ensure that the Indian Ocean does not assume greater priority than it does at present. The chapter will then analyse how the US understands and implements each objective.

There are wildcards, however, that could upset US implementation of these three objectives. This chapter will close by exploring four specific risks: additional Chinese basing in the Indian Ocean, Chinese grey-zone activity, the US or its allies and partners elevating China's threat perceptions in the region, and reduced allied and partner presence in Indian Ocean institutions and frameworks. Ultimately, Washington does not aim to reduce its Indian Ocean presence and will need to manage the potential for wildcards to disrupt ongoing efforts to achieve its goals.

Nevertheless, US defence planners have requirements to meet in preparation for warfighting scenarios in higher priority regions in the coming decades.

US objectives in the Indian Ocean

While observers have raised concerns about the potential for the US presence to decline in the Indian Ocean, a study of US strategy, policy documents and official activities reveals the intensification of US diplomatic and military outreach to the region and more broadly an expansion of its naval capability. There is an interconnectedness between activity in domains such as air, space, and cyber at the heart of this capability, but some service-specific examples include the Navy's top priority of adding the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine to the fleet, as well as the development of a next-generation frigate (Constellation-class), a next-generation destroyer class (DDG(X)), a next-generation attack submarine class (SSN(X)), and a F/A-18E/F Super Hornet replacement.

Yet, these efforts are not rooted in a desire for the US to expand its strategic-level focus on the Indian Ocean. In fact, the US is an extra-regional Indian Ocean stakeholder. Despite being at a geographic disadvantage, the country maintains two overarching objectives in this region: upholding the security and stability of Indian Ocean sea lanes and maintaining access to Indian Ocean basing facilities. As a new decade begins, the picture of what is driving this intensified set of activities emerges along with a third objective: the need to keep the Indian Ocean secondary to increasingly interconnected Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic priority theatres for the US in the backdrop of high-end, great power competition warfighting requirements against China and Russia.

US strategy in the Indian Ocean, and its implementation, especially via its sea services, continues to evolve. Over the past decade, there has been some continuity with past national strategic objectives, but the strategic context has changed due to the rise in Washington's global threat perceptions of both China and Russia. When examining US strategy and policy documents as well as official statements, the three primary interests noted above can be distilled regarding US interests in the Indian Ocean.[2] Nevertheless, it is also worth noting the absence of a US government publication that clearly outlines a holistic view of Indian Ocean security. The trifurcated nature of defence planning responsibility for the region's water-space reflects this inattention and secondary priority.[3]

Upholding the free flow of commerce and norms

The first US strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is upholding the free flow of commerce and more broadly, peaceful norms in the region. With strategic chokepoints

such as the Strait of Hormuz and roughly half of all container traffic transiting these sea lanes, the region is a vital link for the global economy, as most trade is destined for locations outside the Indian Ocean. Rather than taking a narrow view of national interests through cargo and hydrocarbons destined only for US shores, Washington sees these interests broadly as continuing to uphold "the international order the United States helped to establish".[4]

The Commander of US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), US 5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces in Bahrain, reiterated his command's priority to implementing this objective at the Manama Air Power Symposium in November 2020:

> We are committed to upholding the international rules-based order, ensuring the free flow of commerce, the interoperability between navies, industry and joint partners, and maintaining those relationships.[5]

This strategic and operational objective reflects continuity in US goals and dates back decades to the Carter Doctrine asserting US defence requirements in the region after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian hostage crisis raised concerns about access to hydrocarbon resources.[6] The first two decades of the 2000s saw increased US attention on the Middle East due to counterterrorism. Despite the draw-down of forces in Afghanistan and Iraq as of 2021, coalition missions such as counterpiracy and counterterrorism continue to keep US naval forces occupied in the western Indian Ocean Region. Finally, NAVCENT remains focused on its persistent Iran deterrence mission.

Even as the shale revolution has raised questions about the US desire to keep military forces deployed in the Middle East, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* makes clear the US interest in embracing "energy dominance" by defending the US role as an energy exporter, its global energy infrastructure, and its support to allies in diversifying energy sources.[7]

Defending such energy infrastructure and supporting allies and partners remained an objective under the Biden administration. Its *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* discusses combating threats such as "energy coercion" alongside likeminded nations.[8] With regard to Middle East policy specifically under the Biden administration, the *Guidance* emphasises continued US commitments via military presence to deterring Iranian aggression and disrupting al-Qaeda and other international terrorist networks.[9]

Whereas oil was the focus of attention in the 1970s, a fundamental issue at stake was the sea lines of communication (SLOC) protection mission. This continues to remain a priority today, in addition to the deterrence of Iran mission. Despite the focus on transitioning to renewable energy sources, the underlying requirement

persists to conduct the SLOC protection mission in the region in close collaboration with the shipping industry and multinational partners; and to deter Iran also for the purpose of maintaining stability in Indian Ocean sea lanes and chokepoints.

Implementation

The US implements its objective to ensure the free flow of commerce in the western Indian Ocean through its naval and maritime presence, such as by aircraft carriers, and major basing through NAVCENT in Bahrain. This approach is bolstered by related activities such as port visits, exercises, naval diplomatic events (e.g. hosting dignitaries onboard ships), humanitarian programs, and wargames. Furthermore, Combined Maritime Forces established two new task forces in 2022 and 2023 to enhance maritime security in the Red Sea and to conduct training, respectively. Following an uptick in threatening activity from Iran to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman, the Department of Defense announced the deployment of a destroyer plus F-35 and F-16 fighters to the NAVCENT area of operations in June 2023. By the end of the year, the Department of Defense stood up Operation Prosperity Guardian with allies and partners in response to Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea.

Another way the US implements its objective of ensuring order in the region is through its Freedom of Navigation (FON) program. While much attention to the FON program centres on recent US operations against expansive maritime claims by China in the South China Sea, the US FON program dates back four decades. The US Department of Defense runs this program's operational challenges and provides annual reporting to Congress. These reports indicate that the US conducts these operations to ensure the defence of its interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) for the right of military forces to fly and sail where international law permits.

While attention to US FON operations is often focused on US competitors, reports show that the US conducts these operations against excessive maritime claims of Indian Ocean partners,[10] including India – arguably the object of significant US attention for the past 20 years of its Asia policy. The controversy over the US Navy's FON operation in India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in April 2021 was a reminder of Washington's deep commitment to this program, even when at odds with the stances of priority strategic partners. Indeed, the number of FON challenges have risen significantly in the past decade, especially against excessive claims by China and Russia.[11] The Biden administration continued to conduct FON operations in the South China Sea. The Freedom of Navigation report for 2020 detailed US operational challenges against excessive maritime claims by Indian Ocean countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Maldives. The pattern of operations under the FON

program continues to appear consistent, and the implementation of this program is a feature of regular US naval deployments to the Indian Ocean.

Maintaining continued military access in the Indian Ocean

The second US strategic objective is maintaining continued military access to the entire Indian Ocean. The US needs the ability to flow forces throughout this vast water-space to meet its national interests and to fulfill coalition objectives. This requirement has been consistently demonstrated during contingency operations, and most prominently when the US was fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Implementing this objective is challenging given the lack of US territories in the region, rendering the country a non-resident stakeholder.

Implementation

How the US achieves this objective lies with military basing facilities across the entire Indian Ocean, as well as seeking access where possible from allies and partners. Most important is the operation of a three-star US Navy admiral command in Bahrain, with responsibilities for multiple bodies of water: the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, North Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. US Naval Forces Central Command is subordinate to the higher headquarters of US Central Command (CENTCOM). Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa falls under US Africa Command (AFRICOM). While Stuttgart, Germany is the home of AFRICOM, and Naples, Italy is the home of one of its subordinate commands, US Naval Forces Africa, the US operational footprint in Africa is concentrated in Djibouti adjacent to the critical Bab-al-Mandeb strait. US military forces can also benefit from access provided by allied basing if needed, such as France's Réunion territory in the western Indian Ocean. The US military also benefits from air access in other key locations such as Kenya, Oman, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.[12]

At the opposite end of the Indian Ocean is the US Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific (COMLOG WESTPAC)/Task Force 73 in Singapore. COMLOG WESTPAC is commanded by a one-star US Navy admiral to provide the US with critical access in both the Indian and Pacific oceans. Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 7, also located in Singapore, is the Navy's only forward-deployed DESRON in this region. Further east, US military activities by the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin (MRF-D) initiative have demonstrated regular regional cooperation with Australian Defence Force counterparts since 2012.

At the centre of the Indian Ocean, the US relies on a basing arrangement provided by its close alliance partner, the United Kingdom. Access to Diego Garcia for the last half-century has been a critical enabler of joint US military operations both westward

to Middle East hotspots as well as for deploying forces eastward to the Pacific. While Mauritius has made considerable progress in its legal and diplomatic campaign against the UK over the Chagos Archipelago, the small island state even expressed its willingness to conclude a bilateral agreement with the US that would permit continued military presence on Diego Garcia for a 99-year duration.[13] In October 2024, Mauritius and the UK announced an agreement to resolve their dispute over sovereignty that would secure the joint UK-US military base for at least 99 years.

Closer to the main east-west sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, India agreed to provide US military forces access to logistics support with the 2016 conclusion of the logistics exchange memorandum of agreement with Washington. There are other Indian Ocean countries where the US has negotiated similar logistics arrangements, ranging from Comoros to Sri Lanka to Thailand.[14]

In the past decade, the US has notably attempted to secure status of forces agreements with countries in the central Indian Ocean such as Maldives and Sri Lanka, but with no success on building these complex defence ties. Nevertheless, Washington continued to develop a strategic relationship with Maldives in 2020 through the conclusion of a simple defence framework agreement. Meanwhile, the United States is seeking to expand its defence relationship with Bangladesh through the pursuit of a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) for logistics cooperation. Given increased US threat perceptions of China globally, including in the Indian Ocean, Washington appears determined to maintain and expand its basing and other access in the region as the new decade begins.

Preventing the Indian Ocean from becoming a priority theatre

The third US interest in the Indian Ocean is not articulated in any official strategy document, but a close study of US priorities reveals the need for Washington to keep this theatre from becoming a priority in the context of great power, strategic competition with China and Russia. The Indian Ocean is of course an important region for the US, as seen earlier through its efforts to maintain access and presence. Yet, Washington will need to prioritise resources for theatres that are more important to national interests, which will be examined below.

As discussed, the US does not have sovereign territory in the Indian Ocean that would require defence as it does in the Pacific. In fact, US officials have long discussed how the "United States is a Pacific nation",[15] as found in multiple locations in the US Department of Defense's 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*. This is due to five Pacific states and Pacific territories including Guam, American Samoa, Wake Island, and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands.

The US-China relationship continues to become increasingly tense and their disagreements span a range of dimensions. As this climate heats up, the US focus on the Pacific is of top concern. As discussed in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*: "The Indo-Pacific is the Department of Defense's priority theater."[16] This sentiment was repeated by the previous Secretary of Defense, although it is clear from his remarks about "destabilizing activities from the PLA"[17] that the Pentagon is focused on Chinese assertiveness in the Pacific segment of the wider Indo-Pacific region. The Indian Ocean is comparatively of secondary importance.[18] It is notable that, despite the significant growth in the Chinese navy's reach and presence in the Indian Ocean in the past decade such as through its regular counterpiracy operations and submarine deployments, the US Unified Command Plan has not changed its defence planning boundaries in this region.[19] No Indian Ocean Region Command (IORCOM) has emerged, for example, and the three combatant commands' responsibilities for different segments of the Indian Ocean water-space are intact: CENTCOM, AFRICOM, and US Pacific Command (PACOM). The only alteration that took place was a name change for the latter, now called US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), with no difference in area of responsibility.

At the military service level, the US naval services are also indicating a greater focus on high-end warfare. The US Navy has made it clear that it is getting its own house in order to organise, train, and equip the service in support of higher-level guidance with an eye on competition and conflict in the Pacific and increased attention to the Atlantic and Arctic, as will be examined below. These waters – surrounding US territory – have in effect become increasingly interconnected as a US defence and naval planning priority due to great power threats from China and Russia. As a result, close analysis of strategy documents and official statements suggests that attention to the Indian Ocean is secondary.

In December 2020, the US Navy prepared an ambitious 30-year shipbuilding plan for Congress. The costly effort aims to move the US toward a 355-ship navy. That same month, the tri-service US Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard maritime strategy was released and refers to the "Indo-Pacific", which is defined in the Pentagon's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* as "from the west coast of the United States to the western shores of India".[20] Yet the comparative Pacific focus is clear based on the language about postures of US and Chinese forces:

> Today, roughly 60 per cent of Navy forces are in the *Indo-Pacific region*... Naval Service operations and force posture will focus on countering PRC malign behavior globally and strengthening regional deterrence in the *Indo-Pacific region*... Whereas US naval forces are globally dispersed, supporting US interests and deterring aggression from multiple threats, China's

> numerically larger forces are primarily concentrated in the *Western Pacific*. However, as China seeks to establish regional hegemony, it is also expanding its global reach. China's One Belt One Road initiative is extending its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure that will enable its forces to operate farther from its shores than ever before, including the *polar regions, Indian Ocean, and Atlantic Ocean*. These projects often leverage predatory lending terms that China exploits to control access to key strategic maritime locations.[21] [Emphasis added]

In support of the tri-service maritime strategy, the US Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Mike Gilday released the Navy's *Navigation Plan* in January 2021. The document focuses on training "Sailors for high-end warfighting and drives updated joint and combined naval concepts, fleet requirements, and future naval capabilities."[22]

Of the locations for the US Navy's global presence, the Pacific and Arctic theatres are emphasised in the *Navigation Plan*: "We will continue to exercise with like-minded navies across the globe from the High North to the Western Pacific to demonstrate our collective readiness and resolve."[23] While preparation for a maritime conflict with China in the Pacific is the top priority, the reference to the High North suggests an increasing focus on security of the Arctic. As a striking indicator of this heightened priority to US interests for homeland and allied security, all six US military services (Navy and Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Air and Space Forces, and Army) now have strategies dedicated to the Arctic in addition to the Department of Defense.[24] Most recently, the White House released the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* in October 2022.

Related is increased operational-level attention to the defence of the Atlantic, extending to the Arctic as an interconnected space. European analysts have commented on increased US Navy operations in the eastern Atlantic.[25] Further west, US Second Fleet was re-established in 2018 in Norfolk, Virginia, with responsibility in the Arctic and Atlantic. A year later, Submarine Group Two was established, while NATO stood up Joint Force Command Norfolk, which achieved initial operational capability in 2020. In 2019, Second Fleet also established an expeditionary Maritime Operations Center (MOC) in Keflavik, Iceland to explore the concept of a mobile MOC for forward-deployed operations in this theatre. Most vividly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 typifies the imperative of this trend toward greater defence of the Atlantic and Arctic. Washington subsequently implemented changes to US force posture in several European countries. As seen with the Pacific, renewed focus on the Atlantic and Arctic theatres suggests secondary US attention to the Indian Ocean.

Questions about elevating US Navy presence in the Indian Ocean were raised in November 2020 when then-Navy Secretary Kenneth Braithwaite suggested that the US Navy could potentially establish a First Fleet headquarters with responsibility for the Indian Ocean. As a possible location, he suggested Singapore, from where he had recently travelled. The transition in presidential administrations did little to clarify US intentions. In January 2021, CNO Gilday's rollout of the *Navigation Plan* resulted in some elaboration about posture with implications for the Indian Ocean:

> There's a question or challenge to us really on whether or not we are covering down on the battle space of the Indian Ocean as sufficiently as we should, given the commitments and the time distance between both Fifth Fleet and Seventh Fleet. So we're in the process right now, under Admiral Aquilino and his staff to take a much deeper dive into the merits of First Fleet, including what it would cost, so we can make value-based decisions on what those steps may or may not be.[26]

The takeaway from CNO Gilday's comments is that Braithwaite's idea has not yet been fully studied. Comments from INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Phil Davidson in March 2021 indicate that the concept remained under examination by the US Pacific Fleet Commander, who would need to divert resources from elsewhere in the area of operations or request additional resources for implementation. An outstanding question would be the location for a First Fleet headquarters, considering the historical difficulty of obtaining US basing close to the central Indian Ocean sea lanes. Without a breakthrough elsewhere in this sub-region, exploring an expansion of the current US access arrangement in Singapore may be an option if the First Fleet idea is actively pursued – a decision, however, that has still not been made.

Implementation

How the US can implement this third objective of preventing the Indian Ocean from becoming a priority theatre has taken the form of heightened US diplomatic and military activities that serve to preserve an American voice in the region, but one that helps advance strategic partners' interests – especially those of India. In the past decade, the US has taken an increased interest in Indian Ocean regional architecture, notably becoming a dialogue partner to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2012. Because the US is not a resident power, it cannot gain membership in this institution. Similarly, it has not been able to gain observer status in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), but US representatives participate in meetings despite barriers to formal entry. Beyond multilateral forums, Washington is in the process of establishing resident embassies in Seychelles and Maldives. The US also provided short-term relief to Sri Lanka after its debt default in 2022 to reduce the immediate

impacts to its citizens and the wider region, as well as long-term assistance through the new Development Finance Corporation.

In the security realm, the US is pursuing capacity-building efforts in the Indian Ocean to bolster the ability of smaller countries to monitor their territorial waters and EEZs for activity by various deployers, including Chinese fishing and survey vessels as well as submarines. For example, the US Coast Guard cutter *Midgett* visited Maldives in September 2022 and conducted technical exchanges with the Maldives Coast Guard. In May 2023, US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, announced that the Department of State is working with Congress to provide US$6 million to advance maritime security cooperation with Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India. This effort intends to augment interdiction and law enforcement capacity in this segment of the Indian Ocean.

The most high-profile method of preventing the Indian Ocean from becoming a priority US theatre has been the concerted US effort to bolster its alliances and partner relationships in this region. The Trump administration resurrected the Quadrilateral or 'Quad' cooperation between the US, Australia, Japan, and India beginning in 2017,[27] with expanding success into the Biden administration. The 2021 announcement of the Australia, UK, and US (AUKUS) partnership was another demonstration of the US seeking to deepen its alliances – especially with Five Eyes intelligence allies – in the Indo-Pacific. This includes plans to establish a rotational presence for submarines at HMAS *Stirling* near Perth in Western Australia. The 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy, National Security Strategy, and National Defense Strategy all emphasise the priority of alliances and partnerships for the US. While each of these strategies mention the Indian Ocean only once,[28] they highlight India – a focus for nearly two decades of US strategy to provide a deterrent to the rise of China.

Through a long-game effort (including setbacks) by multiple cadres of US government officials and bureaucrats, the US and India have been able to achieve high-profile, bilateral progress as well as multilateral, seen most prominently in the MALABAR exercise. Some of this progression includes the US designation of India as its major defence partner and transfers of exclusive military platforms, such as the P-8I aircraft. Meanwhile, India accepted the challenge to be a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean through various capacity-building initiatives in all corners of the Indian Ocean as well as the decision for the Indian Navy to conduct mission-based deployments in discrete operating locations of the Indian Ocean at all times. Most prominently, New Delhi concluded multiple US defence foundational agreements after nearly 20 years of effort by US officials. Increased threat perceptions of China – including border tensions and troop fatalities – have undoubtedly facilitated India's movement toward the US.

Wildcards for US strategy and implementation in the Indian Ocean

Beyond obvious threats such as the loss of current basing and access or the ongoing potential for accidents and miscalculation, the US does not appear to have significant risks to the execution of this apparent three-pronged strategy in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, it is worth considering a few wildcards that could complicate US defence planning in the region.

Additional Chinese basing in the Indian Ocean

To date, China has one overseas military base; it is in the Indian Ocean Region – in Djibouti. While observers discuss the potential for a second Chinese base to emerge, none has yet materialised. Some observers have suggested the potential for another base in Pakistan or Myanmar as potential locations. Depending on where a base emerged, this would further complicate US defence and naval planning and risk elevating the Indian Ocean in importance. At present, three US combatant commands continue to hold responsibilities for the Indian Ocean Region in the Unified Command Plan. The emergence of a second Chinese base, however, may be a driver to revise this plan, especially if a base were to emerge in more than one US combatant command's area of responsibility (AOR). Djibouti falls under AFRICOM's AOR while, for example, Pakistan is in the CENTCOM AOR and Myanmar is in the INDOPACOM AOR. One potential outcome could be the creation of an Indian Ocean Region Command (IORCOM) that unifies the three segments of Indian Ocean water-space under responsibility by AFRICOM, CENTCOM, and INDOPACOM. The emergence of a second Chinese base would be an important development for US defence planners to address and a critical task of diplomats to prevent.

Chinese grey-zone activities in the Indian Ocean

For the most part, China has been a lawful actor in the Indian Ocean. This is clearly very different from its posture in Pacific waters. Yet, if China were to launch a series of grey-zone activities as seen in the Pacific – activities which are inconsistent with the US interpretation of UNCLOS – this change to the status quo norms of the Indian Ocean would pose a complication to current US defence strategy and planning. This scenario does not appear likely at present due to the lack of territorial claims as seen in the East and South China Seas. Nevertheless, Chinese military forces did conduct highly unprofessional and potentially fatal laser activities against US military personnel in the airspace of Djibouti in 2018. While such activity has not since been reported in media, a resumption of this type of norm-bending, grey-zone activity – especially if it were to result in the loss of life – would escalate threats to the US and have implications for its defence planning in the region.

United States or its allies and partners elevating China's threat perceptions in the Indian Ocean

China's threat perceptions in the Indian Ocean could be heightened due to intentional or inadvertent strategic communications by the US or its allies and partners. For example, this outcome could materialise through sloppy US messaging with regard to the First Fleet concept – including its examination as well as potential implementation.

Another wildcard that could disrupt US strategy would be India elevating China's threat perceptions in the Indian Ocean. For example, in 2019 a Chinese research vessel was guided out of India's EEZ by the Indian Navy. Following the incident, India's Chief of Naval Staff declared an expansive view of India's prerogative as a coastal state: "Our stand is that if you have to do anything in our EEZ, you have to notify us first."[29] Yet, some activity, such as military activity, is consistent with the US interpretation of UNCLOS to support the right of military forces to fly and sail where international law allows – including in EEZs. While UNCLOS permits limitations on activity such as marine scientific research,[30] a scenario where the Indian Navy challenges the Chinese Navy and the latter does not back down by leaving India's EEZ should be concerning to US policymakers. There is no indication at present of US policymakers encouraging India to tone down potentially escalatory rhetoric. If anything, the US appears to support India's efforts to limit China's Indian Ocean reach. For example, it joined India's diplomatic objections to a Chinese ship visiting Sri Lanka's port of Hambantota in August 2022.[31]

Reduced allied and partner presence in Indian Ocean frameworks and coalitions

The past few years have seen greater US allied and partner attention to the security of the Indian Ocean. Yet, domestic politics in these countries may alter their foreign policy stances. For example, Australia is a critical US ally with a range of close defence, intelligence, and diplomatic ties among other dimensions. Australia has backed US interests, including in controversial moments.[32] Furthermore, the new AUKUS partnership underscores the complex levels of cooperation between these allies. But if Australia were to step aside from its participation in the Quad, as it did in 2008, this would be a setback to the allied and partner consensus that has been achieved in the past few years in the region. While this particular action seems highly unlikely at the time of writing, broader crisis developments, domestic politics, and economic priorities are a few of the factors that have historically upset expectations of a continued status quo in the Indian Ocean. Australia ending its role in the International Maritime Security Construct in Bahrain in December 2020 is an important reminder to US policymakers that they cannot take for granted the

participation of critical allies and partners who may not always support Washington how it expects in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined US strategy in the Indian Ocean and identified three distinct objectives. To varying degrees, these objectives represent continuity in US strategic interests in the region, as well as an evolution in how the US will need to posture globally due to changes in threat perceptions of China and Russia over the past decade. Two priorities remain unchanged: upholding the free flow of commerce and norms and maintaining military basing and access in the Indian Ocean. While the US will still need to be able to respond to contingencies in the Middle East, it has sought to draw down forces there after decades of major operations. It does so in recognition of increased great power competition challenges and the need to plan for high-end conflict in the Pacific. The Atlantic and Arctic theatres are also becoming increasingly important for US threat perceptions, including with implications for homeland defence. As a result, the third US strategic objective in the Indian Ocean is to prevent this region from becoming a priority theatre, given the increased salience of the Pacific-Arctic-Atlantic combined theatre.

To implement these objectives, a combination of US diplomatic and military activities will continue to be required. US efforts to participate in regional architecture such as IORA and IONS add value because they preserve a US role in a region where it is a non-resident stakeholder. US military basing and access across the entire Indian Ocean, as well as US sea service presence through transiting platforms and exercises, will remain critical. Continuation of the US FON program serves as another means for maintaining the current order, entailing regular US naval deployments across the Indian Ocean. The US should also continue to invest in its alliances and partner relationships in this region, such as through AUKUS and the Quad, as well as bilateral and multilateral exercises such as MALABAR. Another critical activity will be US national and multinational capacity-building efforts to bolster the ability of local forces to monitor and enforce their maritime domains. The Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness is a recent example of a multi-country initiative that aims to bring technology and training to augment the maritime picture and capabilities of countries in the Indo-Pacific, including the Indian Ocean.

While the US implements its strategy in the Indian Ocean through these and other means, Washington will need to prepare for potential wildcards that may upset its plans. Some factors are additional Chinese basing in the Indian Ocean, Chinese grey-zone activities in this region, the US or its allies and partners elevating China's threat perceptions in the Indian Ocean, and reduced allied and partner presence in Indian Ocean institutions and frameworks. For the most part, US and Chinese

interests in the Indian Ocean largely converge as both powers seek security and stability of these sea lanes. If anything, the Indian Ocean – when contrasted with the tumult of the Pacific – illustrates how this theatre could be a laboratory of cooperation where these two extra-regional rivals can work together operationally. Washington should continue to highlight and advance cooperative and lawful norms here, including when China plays a constructive role and contributes to public goods in the region (e.g., through disaster response or counterpiracy escorts).

Finally, separating the signal from the noise should be a consideration for US policymakers and strategists. In other words, not every Chinese development in the Indian Ocean (e.g. when a Chinese aircraft carrier deploys to these waters for the first time) represents a direct threat to the US. In fact, naval deployments by China and other countries are the order that Washington seeks to ensure at sea and air as long as they abide by international law. Certainly, the possibility exists for crises in the Indian Ocean Region to dictate shifts in US strategy and implementation, resulting in new objectives for US naval and maritime forces. Yet, if the current trajectory holds, US defence planners will continue to prepare for high-end threats in the Pacific, the Arctic, and the Atlantic as the era of great power, strategic competition intensifies.

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2
Indian naval strategy and China

SUDARSHAN SHRIKHANDE

This chapter examines India's options to respond to China's growing naval presence and ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It looks at China's increasing assertiveness and the protracted nature of Sino-Indian friction before examining China's maritime-strategic determinants, particularly in the IOR. It looks into some suppositions that run in Indian counterstrategy discourse, including whether seaborne trade is a 'jugular' for either India or China, and if India's maritime geographic advantages could be countered by China through places and bases as well as multidimensional warfare. The chapter then considers if and how the maritime dimension could be critical in any conflict. It concludes by arguing that Indian maritime strategy should acquire multidimensional leverage, including enhancing cooperative efforts with IOR littoral partners and through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad). India's strategy in conflict should be initially geared towards conventional counter-force with the intention of gaining more effectiveness in conventional counter-value outcomes. Finally, a more aggressive forward posture in the South China Sea could provide India with similar advantages as China is poised to obtain through its multidimensional sea power strategy in the IOR.

Sino-Indian conflict as a 'protracted' war?

In 2021, a beleaguered world battled the COVID-19 pandemic that spread from Wuhan, China. The virus was not the only shadow cast across the Indo-Pacific by a bull-headed China in that 'Year of the Ox' but from 2021 three trends seem to be sharper than at any time in the years past. First, some countries voiced louder concerns about China's intrusion into their politics, economics and perhaps national life itself.[1]

Second, the level of China's diplomatic belligerence and military and maritime actions was greater than seen previously. This has manifested itself not only in the South China Sea directly impacting The Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, but in waters and the airspace around Taiwan and Japan. Third was the growing personal power and consolidation of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Chairman Xi Jinping.

India's concerns about China's rise have sharpened and deepened within the last decade. A former Indian national security adviser wrote, "The June 15 [2020] clashes come as the culmination of a series of incidents of ever-growing scale, duration and severity along the India-China border since 2012."[2] During the July 2024 Quad foreign ministers' meeting in Tokyo, Indian foreign minister Jaishankar reiterated Indian concerns that "the relationship right now with China is not good, not normal."[3] Historically, the occupation and annexation of Tibet, and a long, physically challenging and disputed Himalayan border of over 4,000 kilometres contributed to a complex set of factors leading to the war of 1962 in which India was the 'runner-up'.[4] The October border "Agreement" is about patrolling arrangements and disengagement from border areas. It was announced just before the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia where PM Modi met Chairman Xi.[5] Chinese official statements, however, call it a 'Resolution', perhaps more than a subtle difference. It is very unlikely that this border de-escalation will have any impact in the maritime dimension.

The shadows of that defeat in the Indian mindset have lifted in recent years. While the Doklam face-off in 2017 did not result in any casualties, strong Indian reactions after the initial surprise and the level of localised mobilisation surprised the People's Liberation Army (PLA).[6] Subsequently, two analysts noted the complex, multidimensional exercises the PLA had been conducting across Tibet and cautioned, "The 2017 Doklam stand-off … should be taken as an important reminder of the scenarios that India might need to face from a more aggressive China in the coming years. The surge in PLA exercises can no longer be ignored by India."[7] Yet, India was again tactically and strategically surprised in the summer of 2020 by Chinese intrusions and border violations, this time in Ladakh,[8] where 20 Indian soldiers, including the commanding officer of an infantry battalion, were brutally killed. An unknown number of Chinese soldiers are presumed to have died in a retaliatory attack.[9] The situation remained tense for several years. An unprecedented number of troops were mobilised along the border – the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy were on alert and suitably deployed. Along the border, tanks, artillery and other intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets were pressed in. At the same time, talks between military leaders on the Line of Actual Control, diplomats and foreign ministers, plus national security advisers continued. In February 2021, both governments reached an agreement on disengagement of forces along the contested sectors in Ladakh. As a result, an array of forces may have assumed somewhat more recessed postures.[10]

Before considering determinants for maritime strategies, it may be useful to mention that in official communiques and doctrinal documents, there are no explicit mentions of China as a primary threat. A noted exception was in May 1998, when the then Defence Minister George Fernandes said in a TV interview, "The potential threat from China is greater than from Pakistan, and any person who is concerned with India's security must agree with the fact."[11] As mentioned by a former senior diplomat, this is part of a deliberate policy of at best, making oblique references but not quite naming China as an adversary, threat or serious concern.[12] On the other hand, the media and strategic commentariat in India is not at all bashful about naming China as an adversary, threat and so on. Similarly, the Indian military leadership has flagged China as a security threat.[13] The allusion is to serious well-regarded scholars, diplomats and military veterans and journalists, not to noisier quarters that are of lesser relevance. Of interest and importance is that such "Track 2" commentaries often trigger PRC and CPC politicians and officials to react as if they were "Track 1" and imply that all such talk points to China being an adversary.

The above developments form the backdrop in which India and China may be evaluating respective maritime and naval strategies in light of enduring principles that underscore influence, capabilities and limitations of sea power.[14] According to Eric Gartzke and Jon Lindsay, "Sea power, like all power, represents the potential to punish or plunder, coerce or conquer, reassure or renege. But being mobile, navies also possess the ability to exert force in more places. This has obvious advantages but also some unrecognized drawbacks."[15] For New Delhi and Beijing, this is a 'protracted conflict' that will influence and be influenced by maritime strategies.

There are many challenges in crafting maritime strategies in both capitals. Both nations are primarily continental adversaries with significant interests in using the maritime commons. They are also nuclear-armed neighbours with multi-front challenges.[16] It can be argued, therefore, that while the Sino-Indian confrontation may be protracted, conflict could be about objectives that are limited, i.e. a conflict with a political objective that is short of a regime change for the other side.

In the same vein, the publicly available versions of the *Indian Maritime Doctrine* (2009) and *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (2015), both published by the Indian Navy, do not mention China at all.[17] While there is no mention of China, concerns and strategic thinking required to counter China can be discerned in the six strategies that are spelt out and then elaborated with a dedicated chapter to each. Before the strategies are enumerated, here are the five maritime security objectives:

- to deter conflict and coercion against India
- to conduct maritime military operations in a manner that enables early termination of conflict on terms favourable to India

- to shape a favourable and positive maritime environment, for enhancing net security in India's areas of maritime interest
- to protect Indian coastal and offshore assets against attacks and threats emanating from or at sea
- to develop requisite maritime force levels and maintain the capability for meeting India's maritime security requirement.[18]

The six strategies that the Indian Navy enumerates may be seen to matter in several contexts. These are strategies for deterrence; for conflict; for shaping a favourable and positive maritime environment; for coastal and offshore security; and, for maritime force and capability development.[19] It can thus be seen that while there are as yet no official documents or ministerial statements terming China as an adversary, it can be interpreted that India thinks seriously about China as a concern, even as it tries to balance the relationship.

Determinants for maritime strategies

But there is a contrary argument. In describing cases of imperial wars, fought at a distance, Julian Corbett wrote, "... the belligerents had no contiguous frontiers, and this point is vital. For it is obvious that if two belligerents have a common frontier, it is open to them, no matter how distant or how easy to isolate the limited object may be, to pass at will to unlimited war by invasion."[20] Corbett's observation points to escalatory dynamics that could exist between India and China in a continental context and perhaps also a maritime context to the extent that the Chinese navy positions itself in the Indian Ocean as virtually contiguous with India.[21]

In the Sino-Indian environment, we first examine the strategic drivers for China. In doing so, one needs to consider the entire Indo-Pacific domain, not only the IOR. This is not because the Indo-Pacific has now proliferated as a term in strategic discourse, but because oceans are interconnected. This is especially so in the context of India and China, which share an Asian continental border and yet with far separated coastlines in two different oceans.

Strategic imperatives for China in the Indo-Pacific

China's interests and concerns in the Indo-Pacific can be summarised as follows:

- its global trade profile and economic heft create geo-economic pressures of trade and flag across the Indo Pacific[22]
- geo-political initiatives by Beijing, notably its expanding politico-diplomatic efforts and global economic investments, have geo-strategic consequences for China as well those who are worried or supportive of such initiatives and investments

- the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a concrete and relatively recent manifestation of the CPC's ambitions to achieve great-power influence and be a match for the United States, regionally to begin with.[23]

These drivers have resulted in (but could also be secured by) the national military progress envisaged for the PLA. Its armed services, strategic support forces and theatre and functional commands now constitute a multi-dimensional, modernised and capable force. Underlying the modernisation, driven primarily by the desire to stand up to the US, is the politico-strategic formulations of Chinese Communist thinking.[24] Bolstering this is the considerable intellectual work in military-strategic and military-technical spheres that spurs the PLA to try to be at the cutting edge of tomorrow's warfare requirements.[25]

One ocean, many strategies[26]

Various factors influence Chinese maritime strategy. While the Chinese Defence White Paper of 2019[27] spells out very little on this, earlier pronouncements by the Chinese leadership are clear enough.[28] Some factors are briefly mentioned here:

- China has a two-ocean problem, in that it has interests and threats in the Western Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. Its Western Pacific neighbourhood is primarily maritime and one in which the US is heavily engaged.
- China's maritime geography is a constraining factor at the First Island Chain and its ambitions for control up to the Second Island Chain may be difficult to attain.[29]
- China is strengthening its ability to obtain a good degree of sea control in conflict that enables it to project power in the maritime-terrestrial space extending to the Second Island Chain.[30] The US has termed this multidimensional capability "anti-access, area denial (A2AD)".[31]
- The build-up that it has achieved in its primary area of interest could enable Chinese multidimensional instruments of sea power to have the reserve and surge forces to protect and further its interests in the IOR.[32]

Zheng He to 'gung ho?': Dragon in the IOR[33]

Since its first anti-piracy deployment to the Horn of Africa in 2008, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has had a very regular presence in the Western IOR. The scope, durations and concurrent participation in exercises, port visits and some military diplomatic events indicate that it has developed an ability to try to match other navies with a longer history of distant deployments and sustained presence. It took a few years this century to do what Zheng He's seven expeditions symbolised

in the 15th century.[34] The PLAN may not be 'gung ho' (in Mandarin the term means teamwork) as yet, but it is raising steam to further national interests.

Does this mean that there may soon be a "Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?"[35] China may not create a fleet named after a non-contiguous ocean, nor perhaps a numbered fleet. What seems more likely is for China to create a few bases and arrangements for 'places'. China could continue to deploy a squadron of ships and submarines with regularity, while building reach and sustainability in the process.[36] The IOR provides China physical, military, diplomatic and economic gateways into the Mediterranean and into the North and South Atlantic littorals. Naval deployments have already included submarines, plus intelligence and survey ships. These may soon be followed by carrier deployments for a flag-showing circuit.[37]

China has come some distance from a time when it counted only Albania as a distant and quite inconsequential ally during the Cold War. Today it has Pakistan as a close friend and a partner in nuclear weapons and missile cooperation and proliferation, in addition to likely access to Gwadar and other harbours as well as airbases if considered necessary.[38] Apart from a logistics base in Djibouti, it could leverage the growing proximity to Iran and other potential partners in West Asia, East Africa and among some island-nations in the IOR. In conflict, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or a vulnerable regime in Myanmar, could be corridors for aircraft and missile over-flights, if not more.

While borders and border areas could usually be militarised, ocean areas are not militarised to any comparable degree. What is material are places and bases that could be leveraged for dual use as airbases, ports and harbours. China's sea power is multidimensional with a great amount of sensors, weapons and platforms actually on land. In other words, long-range missiles, shore-based aircraft, unmanned aerial assets, radar arrays, cyber and space-based ISR from the Chinese mainland could project influence over much of the IOR, similar to their reach over the Western Pacific up to the Second Island Chain. In times of conflict, it would be possible for Chinese sea power to be ramped up significantly in all these dimensions, including surged deployments of the PLAN itself. This is where its current pattern of small but unbroken deployments, influence over ports, newer partners, places and bases is critical.

Avoiding a larger conflict, especially one with enhanced maritime and air and missile power dimensions, may be something both Indian and Chinese policymakers prefer. Nonetheless, China may show a greater proclivity towards a war of choice and India and its friends should therefore remain alert to larger scale anticipatory deployments in the IOR. Additional signs to watch for would be a significant embarked expeditionary capability; nuclear attack and conventional submarines missing from mainland bases and not ascertained to be in the Western Pacific or observed crossing through constricted Southeast Asian gateways into the IOR; the positioning of maritime patrol

and People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) strike aircraft in Pakistan; a build-up of long-range, land-based missiles and PLAAF redeployments to Yunnan Province in China; greater ISR activity; or a build-up in some other likely future foreign base or place. This may seem an overstated risk, but it is not something that should be ruled out, especially when the rationale for such larger deployments is masked under multinational exercises scheduled in the IOR (such as Pakistan's naval Exercise AMAN which has steadily become larger and more multi-dimensional).[39]

Given the preceding discussion, what maritime strategic choices could India consider to deter conflict or be well provisioned and positioned to use sea power to win a range of contingent conflicts? There seem to be a few strands that stand out:

- a strategy of denial will work better for India in the IOR than a strategy of control[40]
- China's 'Achilles heel' is its dependence on trade and its interdiction a trump card that India holds[41]
- that India's maritime geography yields significant advantages over Chinese sea power[42]
- that India could use the maritime 'front' as a decisive factor in a conflict with China to offset any continental difficulties across the Himalayas.[43]

Strategy of denial

It seems logical that *denying* an adversary the freedom to manoeuvre across some or all of the lines of statecraft (diplomatic, informational, military and economic) would create benefits. In the course of World War II, the German Navy conducted a strategic sea denial campaign in the North Atlantic to try to sever the very necessary lifelines from the Americas to the British Isles. In World War I, on the other hand, German naval strategy with Russia involved the re-flagging of German cruisers, the SMS *Goeben* and *Breslau* as Turkish vessels and then making attacks on Russian Black Sea ports, thus ending Turkey's neutrality and closing the Bosporus totally for Russian trade. This did not involve a sea denial campaign, but clever strategic politico-diplomatic moves and relatively small naval operations to engineer these outcomes.

In the contemporary Indo-Chinese case, however, there is a tendency to assume that denial of maritime trade or its disruption short of conflict is possible.[44] Sea control and sea denial are fundamentally simple strategic concepts, and are often employed simultaneously and in complementary ways.[45] Sometimes, if one side does not need to use the sea, but wishes to prevent its use by the enemy, sea denial is the option to put in place. Factors of time, space and force are critical for sea control and sea denial. But a highly satisfactory degree of either condition is difficult to achieve in practice.

Both India and China are users of the sea (for military purposes and for trade) and both have an overarching need for sea control varying in terms of time, space

and force.[46] In World War II, for example, the use of the North Atlantic was not very necessary for Germany, but was vital for the Allies. Germany mounted a sustained, bloody and violent offensive campaign of sea denial using mainly submarines, but also shore-based Luftwaffe bombers and some surface ships. However, in the Mediterranean, considering German and Italian involvement in the Adriatic and campaigns in North Africa, they needed sea control. The Allies too had similar needs in the Mediterranean. Thus, the result was both sides competing for sea control with phases of intense naval battles as a result.[47] Thus, the underlying strategic drivers for India and China are about competing efforts towards sea control, of which sea denial is a concomitant activity.[48]

Trade as China's or India's jugular?

Trade is the lifeblood of most economies, even if the relative proportion of external trade to the national GDP can differ. For instance, in 2019, India's ratio of trade to GDP was at 40 per cent and China's was at 36 per cent, not vastly different.[49] Of course, this ratio includes trade in goods as well as services. In terms of balance of trade, India is macroeconomically at a disadvantage by importing far more than it exports year-on-year. For China it is the other way around. In 2023, China exported merchandise worth US$23,380 billion and imported US$2,556 billion. India, on the other hand exported just US$431.5 billion and imported US$672.2 billion. [50]

For petroleum, the 2021 figures are as follows:

Chinese and Indian trade in petroleum 2021 (million tonnes)[51]

	Crude imports	Product imports	Crude exports	Product exports
China	526.0	103.4	1.6	60.6
India	213.7	49.4	0.1	69.3

Maritime trade warfare as a subset of overall economic warfare is feasible only in conflict or in significant constabulary tasking, as in anti-piracy missions. Larger inferences about maritime trade warfare (rather than specifics of targeting and the methods and effectiveness of measures and counter-measures) are discussed below.

Broad and enduring inferences for maritime trade warfare

The lessons from the past few centuries of maritime commerce warfare, including blockades, are instructive.[52] Among the important inferences are that maritime trade warfare, like most economic warfare, takes prolonged periods and consumes resources for results that are slow in taking effect and with some risk of unintended

consequences. There is also too much to target for physical effect to take hold. For example, in 1939, there were about 12,000 ships (57 million deadweight tonnage); but today, about 100,000 merchant ships (1.75 billion dwt) traverse global trade routes. Just one of the larger container ships today carries as much cargo as a 40-ship Atlantic convoy during World War II. While 'white-shipping' information may be more abundant today, targeting white ships may be much more challenging in conflict because information-sharing, even with friendly countries, may be substantially reduced. Moreover, the complexities of ships and the shipping business in terms of flag state, ownership, cargoes, insurance details, crew nationalities, pollution concerns, etc, may make commandeering or targeting problematic.[53]

For these reasons, the term 'Malacca Dilemma' may be better called 'Malacca Vulnerability'. In dealing with the latter, China will need to create conditions where disruptive impact is mitigated. In conflict, re-routing/rescheduling of ships, strategic reserves, rationing, land pipelines, increased terrestrial production and other measures of a war economy have been seen through history. China probably has all these in mind and more counter-measures are available.[54]

These factors apply both to Chinese and Indian trade, but there possibly are differences that India may consider. For the sake of argument, assume that each side decides to physically disrupt maritime trade through interdiction (commandeering or sinking) of a given proportion of each other's ships, especially tankers. In this case, the disruption to India of overall volumes of inflows and outflows might be higher than for China. India may have more of a Red Sea and Persian Gulf vulnerability (compared with China) due to the geographic origins of most petroleum and LNG imports and the predominance of refining capacity on the west coast of India. The problem of protecting exports of refined fuel products also needs to be considered. For India, exports of petro-products are about 60 million tonnes (MT) as against China's nearly similar 70MT.[55] Enabling exports of products is relatively more important for India because of the higher proportionate impact on trade earnings than it is for China. Refined products are consumed faster because they are directly pumped into the retail chain. Petroleum products generally are transported at sea in relatively smaller product tankers that are easier to damage or destroy with ordnance. Fuel products may burn out faster and may pollute the seas relatively less than crude carriers if these are attacked and severely damaged or sunk. Instead of interdicting fuel imports and exports, targeting shore infrastructure that handles trade and energy flows and distribution through long-range precision ordnance or cyber operations may create quicker effects and impact.[56]

Are the Malacca Straits China's economic 'jugular' as some believe?[57] Several serious analyses suggest that China has alternatives. For instance, it already has pipelines from Russia and Central Asia bringing in energy. The CPEC-funded port

of Gwadar may also become an alternative route (once oil pipelines are built), albeit an expensive one. China also imports energy across the Pacific and it has enough strategic energy reserves to consider reducing, redirecting or even halting imports across the Indian Ocean for a few weeks. While there has been much talk about the critical advantages of disrupting China's trade in the IOR for direct and consequential benefits, the Indian Navy's official doctrinal and strategy publication does not give it such centrality.[58] Nations rarely have a jugular in a strategic sense.[59] Both China and India have options and alternatives and, therefore, neither has a jugular. Offensive and defensive trade warfare remain vital strategic measures that would probably consume time, space and force in great measure and show results and setbacks relatively slowly in a way not dissimilar to bombing campaigns.

As Mahan argued, maritime trade warfare:

> is doubtless a most important secondary operation of naval war, and it is not likely to be abandoned till war itself shall cease; but regarded as a primary and fundamental measure, sufficient in itself to crush an enemy, it is probably a delusion, and a most dangerous delusion, when presented in the fascinating garb of cheapness ...[60]

IOR maritime geography reconsidered

Several experts (among them Kaplan, Brewster, Sanyal) have deeply considered IOR history and strategic geography in books.[61] Logically, India has significant geo-strategic advantages of location. This is helped by the focus being given to the development of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, furthering security relationships with IOR island nations and via partnerships like the Quad, increasing convergences with some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and through some major defence reorganisation measures.

But more thought needs to be given to assessing advantages of strategic geography in the maritime dimension.[62] Certainly, India benefits from operating along interior lines that are shorter, and with a network of ports, naval and air bases within the peninsula and now increasing infrastructure in the islands within the Bay of Bengal. But, as Milan Vego points out, "interior lines do not by themselves confer a marked advantage to one's naval forces".[63]

In this matter, the issues of India's two-front concerns arising from the Sino-Pakistani axis' deep cooperation are serious because they are disruptors for time, space, and force issues for India and an enabler for China. Indian military and strategic planning may need to account for the following:

- Although operating on extended exterior lines, possible future access to bases and places in Pakistan, Djibouti, Iran, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar,

Sri Lanka, Maldives, etc, would help reduce the length of Chinese lines and interdiction of Indian lines of operations. Vego explains, "a force moving along exterior lines ... can threaten the enemy with envelopment".[64]

- In overcoming constraints of maritime distances (time, space, force) an accelerated shift is happening via the multidimensional nature of sea power. This is more clearly recognised in the so-called A2AD framework that China has created along its own maritime fronts in the Western Pacific.[65]
- However, the IOR could be similarly bracketed within China's A2AD framework. "Indian sea power will not have the luxury of fighting only the PLAN. It will also be fighting all the combined elements of the PLA's military power, from air power to long-range ballistic missiles, range of expeditionary capabilities, cyber warfare and space-based assets. India's responses against the PLAN likewise, ought to be joint."[66]
- India is making these shifts, though perhaps not as robustly as would benefit future deterrence and warfighting. Indian strategic planning needs to focus on multi-dimensional instruments. Naval power would remain the leading edge, but in a full amalgam of the other four dimensions: air, land, space and cyber.
- While the Quad may not play a central role in India's continentally dominated Sino-Indian political-military environment, ISR, logistics and pressure on PLA in the China Seas undertaken by the Quad could be enablers for India to leverage time, space, and force for greater effectiveness.[67] What is interesting is the very broad spectrum versatility and elasticity of the Quad communiques and follow-up steps, now that summits between the four leaders, their ministers, and military leaders are more regular.[68]
- India's own efforts in acquiring partners and friends in the IOR through initiatives such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) could benefit the challenges that lines of strategic and operational geography pose. Whether these are 'clever alliances' or initiatives with limited impact can only be ascertained in crises.[69] No effort should be spared, though.
- The Indian strategic community has reacted quite favourably to the AUKUS pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US.[70] An important inference related to the mention earlier of "Track 2" from India and elsewhere, especially in the other three Quad partners, is the one seen from China's "Track 1" reactions. Beijing and other places in China do react to almost every Quad step as anti-China; and in the same breath sometimes write or say that the Quad does not matter much or worry them. In a sense, the Quad may be contributing to deterrence and this is an attribute that seems to be slowly noticed in some members of ASEAN, who also see its wide-ranging potential benefits in general matters of human security.

Decisiveness of a maritime front?

As seen thus far, there has been a strand of thinking among some analysts that the opening of a maritime front against China in a conflict could ease the pressure along land frontiers.[71] Chief among these perspectives has been a measure of over-interpretation of the consequences of disrupting Chinese trade, especially energy flows, by leveraging India's advantages astride the Malacca Strait as well as its overall peninsular centrality in the IOR itself.[72] These advantages do exist, but their effects are unlikely to be fast or decisive when the strong preferences in New Delhi and Beijing are likely to be for a short-term conflict with limited escalation.[73] What helps, as it did during the 1999 Kargil conflict and possibly during Galwan, is the factor of deterrence and escalation control that sea power brings.

When multidimensional sea power becomes more potent, it usually brings a higher level of overall deterrence (conventional and nuclear) to the strategic table. Since there are no guarantees that deterrence will not collapse or escalatory dynamics will not kick in, a future-ready navy also becomes a more effective instrument of warfare. Leveraging the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard and other dimensions of warfare (land, air, space, and cyber) across the four main maritime tasks of deterrence, sea control, sea denial and power-projection would be the important considerations for deterrence itself.

Deterrence requires some reimagining by India. Mainly, this could be in configuring the five dimensions used in conjunction and close cooperation. With the bolstered charter of the Chief of Defence Staff and of the newly carved out Department of Military Affairs, as well as the Defence Planning Committee, it is hoped that force planning will be aligned to a national military strategy rather than the current reality of 10- or 15-year acquisition plans being euphemistically called Joint Long Term Perspective Plans. Fundamentally, India needs to deter or jointly fight the PLA's sea power across the five dimensions. Therefore, defence interoperability across these five dimensions should evolve meaningfully so that the purposes of deterrence might be well served. Currently, the focus is on occasional, mainly naval exercises as part of defence interoperability. If this expands, especially within Quad partners, the overall counterbalancing impact could improve over the present focus on maritime interoperability.

As previously discussed, we must consider sea control and denial together. Sea control in time and space is a necessary condition for power projection, even if it is tactically disputed, as is often the case. To use terms from nuclear strategy, Indian sea power missions would vary between counter-value and counter-force. In conflict, counter-value missions would be against an adversary's economic capacities. At sea, this would include interdiction of trading ships, and land-attacks from the sea

against economic targets such as refineries, transport nodes, and ports. In contrast, counter-force missions are those designed to directly weaken the enemy's war-fighting capabilities such as looking for and attacking adversaries' forces and support elements that directly enable them to fight. Through combinations of manoeuvre and attrition, the PLA's effective sea power in and over the IOR would need to be degraded. Effective counter-force in the early days of what may sometimes be a shorter conflict with limited political and military objectives improves the efficiency and effectiveness of counter-value, especially if the conflict becomes prolonged. At the military strategic and operation levels of warfare, commanders have to handle time, force, and space conundrums for dynamically switching between counter-value and counter-force missions. This dynamism is especially found in air and naval dimensions, aided now by cyber and space. At the tactical level of warfare, newer ways of delivering ordnance on target would be necessary. In years to come India could dangerously lag behind China even in the IOR, especially with Pakistan (and maybe others) on China's side.[74]

A maritime front in the South China Sea?

As a closing argument for strategy development, should India think more carefully about its South China Sea 'dilemma'? The dilemma perhaps is that the South China Sea is important for India's trade and regional standing, plus the politico-diplomatic centrality given to the formulation of the Indo-Pacific and the freedom of the seas, but India is not able to do much about it at the moment.[75] As Darshana Baruah recently commented, "Today, maritime security is at the core of foreign policy engagements for many of India's partnerships. And it spans across the Indo-Pacific."[76]

India's trade through the Taiwan Strait is itself considerable.[77] As at 2024, around 13.6 per cent of India's exports and 14.7 per cent of imports pass through Taiwan Strait. For Japan, 25.2 per cent of exports and 32.1 per cent of imports pass through the Taiwan Strait; for China it is 14.9 per cent for exports but 32.5 per cent for imports; for the US it is relatively less at 2.7 per cent for exports and 3.2 per cent for imports. In times of high tension or conflict, rerouting and recalibration of trade would have to be contemplated by India.

While material constraints, including logistics limitations, make a South China Sea strategy difficult for the Indian Navy in the near-term, evolving a strategy is quite necessary. After all, the PLAN too was not comfortably placed in the IOR at the end of the 2000s and still has limitations. However, China has been able to create a credible impression, constraints notwithstanding, that it will "play, stay and have a say" in the IOR.[78] Effectively, China has created a maritime front vis-a-vis India of growing substance. China is a continental *and* maritime neighbour to India. While India is a strong continental neighbour of China, it is not yet its maritime neighbour, but it should think more about why and how it ought to be.

For these purposes, India, and particularly the Indian Navy, may now think more about:

- leveraging long-range platforms that can deploy and sustain themselves better in time of tension and conflict with a higher degree of stealth
- developing greater partnerships with others in the South China Sea littoral, at least for places if not bases
- enhancing consonance in arrangements such as the Quad at least for ISR, if not for cooperative warfighting
- conceiving newer, multidimensional and technologically impactful ways of warfare.

India's ability to create pressures on China within the so-called First and Second Island Chains is not going to be easy. But in so doing, it would profitably mimic what China seems to have put in place for furthering its own interests in the IOR. From being a currently capable sea power in the IOR, India needs to enhance and expand capabilities into the larger Indo-Pacific and prepare for a protracted struggle possibly turning into a larger war.

Conclusion

Indian sea power, developed and enabled for multidimensional delivery when required, could serve to provide the strategic bridge connecting India's continentally dominant concerns with increasingly important maritime leverages required in the IOR and desirably even in the South China Sea. Given that China's influence, reach and leverage in and over the IOR is very likely to improve, Indian maritime options have to be strengthened as well. While quantitative enhancements are necessary, qualitative elements of jointness, coalitions, and places and bases would be equally necessary. In this, the Quad could become a key agency and the more effort directed towards this the better for cooperative deterrence and cooperative actions, should deterrence appear shaky. Multi-dimensional sea power may bring not only a better level of deterrence with respect to China, but also greater effectiveness in conflict should it come to that. Sea power configured for sharp, intense counter-force capabilities would, in turn, enable increased effectiveness of counter-value operations for economic warfare. Finally, Indian sea power would have attributes and impact if leveraged in the Western Pacific littoral similar to what Chinese instruments would have in the IOR. However, more than merely mirroring the PLAN, the Indian Navy could benefit from superior strategic imagination, operational brilliance, tactical audacity and useful friends to keep and even win the peace.

Notes: chapter 2

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3

China’s future military presence in the Indian Ocean: interests and imperatives[1]

JOSHUA T. WHITE

China has significantly expanded its engagements in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) over the past three decades, and although its ultimate aims remain somewhat ambiguous, it is clear that the Chinese leadership is actively pursuing capabilities that would let it undertake a range of military missions in the region. This chapter begins by reviewing the history of, and doctrinal justifications for, China’s out of area operations in the IOR and describing the growing capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the region.[2] It then explores five potential PLA mission objectives – ranging from relatively ‘benign’ activities to those that would be perceived as threatening to littoral states and other users of the Indian Ocean – and describes the kinds of investments that China would require to carry them out.

These objectives are: first, conducting non-combat activities focused on protecting Chinese citizens and investments, and bolstering China’s soft power influence; second, undertaking counterterrorism activities, unilaterally or with partners, against organisations that threaten China; third, collecting intelligence in support of operational requirements, and against key adversaries; fourth, supporting efforts aimed at coercive diplomacy toward small countries in the region; and fifth, enabling effective operations in a conflict environment, namely the ability to deter, mitigate, or terminate a state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China, and

to meaningfully hold at risk the assets of India or its partners in the event of a wider conflict. The chapter concludes by highlighting the kinds of Chinese investments that might serve as leading indicators of the PLA's efforts to undertake higher-order missions that would be particularly concerning to countries such as India, the United States and Australia. The likely perspectives on, and responses by, these three countries to such PLA efforts are addressed in the other chapters in this volume.

China's reach into the IOR

A doctrine of far seas defence

The Indian Ocean has long been, at best, a secondary theatre for Chinese strategists. China's ability to project power into the IOR requires an expeditionary naval capability that, until recently, was neither well conceptualised in its public strategic documents, nor available in the form of actual military assets.

Scholars trace the roots of China's out of area operations in the IOR to the mid-1980s, when the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which had until that time focused on coastal and near sea operations, undertook a series of port calls on Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.[3] It became apparent shortly thereafter during the 1991 crisis in Somalia that the PLAN was ill-equipped to carry out even non-combat operations far from its shores, and the Chinese government had to arrange for a state-owned commercial vessel to evacuate Chinese citizens.[4] Notwithstanding this limitation, China's first defence white paper, released in 1998, reflected limited naval ambitions and took pains to note that China "does not station any troops or set up any military bases in any foreign country".[5] President Hu Jintao upended and enlarged the scope of the navy's ambitions in a speech to the Central Military Commission in 2004, in which he charged the PLA with defending China's expanding national interests and "safeguarding world peace".[6] While the PLAN continued to prioritise near seas defence, these new publicly articulated missions foreshadowed a more ambitious and active expeditionary role for the navy. The 2006 defence white paper noted the rise of security-related issues pertaining to energy and international shipping routes, and the 2008 paper sharpened China's focus on the growing global competition for resources and expressed the need for the PLAN to have the capabilities to conduct "cooperation in distant waters".[7]

Beginning in late 2008, the PLAN began a series of counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, which it has continued almost without interruption to the present day. These deployments have involved a regular rotation of surface vessels, and occasionally conventional and nuclear attack submarines.[8] The PLAN has used more than a decade and a half of such deployments, undertaken as a unilateral effort rather than in conjunction with multinational task forces, to develop its blue-water logistics capabilities and justify its military presence far from Chinese shores.

Subsequent Chinese defence white papers continued to gradually expand the public ambit and specificity of the PLAN's ambitions. The 2010 paper highlighted the importance of logistics support for out of area activities, and the 2013 paper noted explicitly the development of blue-water capabilities and listed specific missions such as protecting merchant vessels, evacuating Chinese citizens abroad, and providing "reliable security support for Chinese interests overseas".[9] The PLA's revised *Science of Military Strategy,* also published in 2013, specifically referred to expansion into the "two oceans" region (i.e. the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as the relevant littoral areas).[10]

If there was any remaining doubt about the scope of China's blue-water ambitions, they were laid to rest with the 2015 defence white paper, which delineated eight "strategic tasks" for the PLA:

> … effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China's territorial land, air and sea; resolutely defend the unification of the motherland; safeguard China's security and interests in new domains; safeguard the security of China's overseas interests; maintain strategic deterrence and carry out nuclear counterattack; participate in regional and international security cooperation and maintain regional and world peace; strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism and terrorism … and perform such tasks as emergency rescue and disaster relief, rights and interests protection, guard duties, and support for national economic and social development.[11]

Subsequent defence documents, released in 2017 and 2019, expounded on these themes, and did so in a way that seemed designed to support the narrative vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), giving particular emphasis to the PLA's role in protecting Chinese interests and citizens overseas.[12]

In short, China has over the last three decades articulated an increasingly expansive vision for its military activities in the IOR, anchored in several broad objectives: securing key sources of energy, protecting overseas investments and citizens, bolstering China's reputation and political influence, and maintaining strategic deterrence.[13]

Chinese defence capabilities for the IOR

Although the PLA's real capabilities in the IOR continue to lag, at times dramatically, the broad set of strategic tasks it has been asked to pursue, it has made notable strides in recent years in building its expeditionary capabilities and enablers.[14] These include the unexpected establishment in 2017 of a naval logistics facility in Djibouti to enable the PLAN to more effectively undertake activities, and project power, in the IOR.[15] After years of asserting that it sought no overseas bases, the Chinese

government has justified the base at Djibouti on the grounds that it will support peacekeeping operations, the protection of overseas citizens, anti-piracy operations, and the protection of regional BRI-related investments.[16] Indeed, the base has helped to support a robust and sustained rotation of counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden. The Department of Defence estimated that between the time that these activities in the Gulf of Aden commenced in 2018 and January 2023, the PLA deployed "131 vessels and more than 32,000 personnel across 42 escort missions."[17] By any measure, this represents a significant investment by the PLA and has created an ongoing platform for expeditionary training and experimentation.

As part of its broader efforts at modernisation, the PLA is developing an array of military platforms that, due to their endurance and defensive capabilities, are well suited for deployment in the IOR. While much attention has been paid to the PLAN's commissioning of its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, in 2012 and its ongoing indigenous carrier program, perhaps the most significant contribution to the PLAN's out of area capabilities has come from its rapid development of other major surface combatants, many of which have already been deployed in the IOR.[18] These include guided-missile cruisers (Type 055), destroyers (Type 052C/D), and frigates (Type 054A).[19] The PLAN has also built eight large amphibious transport docks (Type 071) that can house four air-cushioned landing craft and four helicopters, and is building a fleet of even larger amphibious assault ships (Type 075) that can likely carry over two dozen helicopters.[20] To enable these combatants to undertake sustained missions in the IOR, the PLAN has sought in recent years to expand its nascent fleet of replenishment and auxiliary vessels, including oilers, salvage and rescue ships, hospital ships, and transport vessels.[21] For its part, the PLAN's submarine fleet, which is "heavily geared towards anti-surface and land-attack missions," is also slated to grow.[22] Both conventional and nuclear-powered submarines have undertaken patrols in the Indian Ocean and made port calls at friendly countries.[23]

At the same time, the PLA is investing in other enablers that could be used to support specific overseas missions in the IOR. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) presently has limited expeditionary capabilities, but it is expanding the long-range airlift fleet that it has used episodically for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, non-combatant evacuations (e.g. from Libya in 2011), and exercise engagements with foreign militaries.[24] Although Chinese forces operating in the IOR are presumed to be largely reliant on host-nation infrastructure and commercial satellites, China is investing in longer-range military communication infrastructure to improve its communication and situational awareness.[25]

As its ambitions and capabilities have grown, China has naturally increased its military-related engagements with countries in the IOR. Data show that the PLA's engagements in Asia began a steep annual rise in 2012; its aggregate number of

outbound naval port calls (apart from those related to the counterpiracy task force) began rising dramatically in 2013; and international military exercises began a similar trend in 2014.[26] The data suggest that these trends similarly apply to the PLA's engagements specifically in the IOR.

China's most robust military relationship in the IOR is with Pakistan, with whom it has decades-long defence and security ties that span a range of sensitive issues, including nuclear technology, satellites, intelligence sharing, and co-development of fighter aircraft. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the PLAN's port visits in the IOR in recent years have been to Pakistan, and Chinese naval vessels are presumed to enjoy fulsome access to supply and repair facilities at the Karachi shipyards. Bangladesh is the second largest recipient of Chinese military equipment and engagement in the region. Despite its defence cooperation agreements with India, Bangladesh counts China as its leading defence supplier.[27] It has purchased submarines, jet trainers, and other major equipment, as well as small arms, and has deepened ties with the PLA even as it has sought to assuage New Delhi that China will not be given a strategic foothold in the Bay of Bengal.[28]

PLA engagements with other countries in South Asia remain limited. Despite the relatively attractive cost of its military equipment, China has not yet made the concessionary sale of arms a major aspect of its defence diplomacy, and many countries in the region have been wary of upsetting India by purchasing major Chinese arms or engaging in regular defence exercises.[29] Nepal undertook its first military exercise with China only in early 2017, a small event notionally focused on counterterrorism operations.[30] China's security relationship with Sri Lanka is more robust, and benefits from the legacy of Beijing's military support to Colombo in the latter stages of Sri Lanka's long civil war.[31] More recently, the PLAN has used Colombo as an occasional port of call; the two militaries have engaged in joint exercises; and the PLA has donated a frigate to the Sri Lankan navy and is constructing facilities at the Sri Lankan military academy.[32] Sri Lanka is a site of significant Chinese investment, including commercial development of the Colombo port, and a controversial 99-year lease of Hambantota Port to a Chinese state-owned enterprise.

Myanmar has been a major focus of China's BRI efforts, but those projects have been complicated by the military's coup d'état in February 2021. China has ties with smaller Indian Ocean states, such as Maldives, where it has financed a major bridge and other investments; and Seychelles and Mauritius, which have received attention from senior Chinese political leaders and have hosted PLAN vessels for port visits. But so far, China's defence engagements with smaller IOR countries have been very limited, particularly when compared to the PLA's significant role as a defence partner and supplier in East Africa.[33]

PLA mission sets in the Indian Ocean Region

Non-combat operations

Counterpiracy and humanitarian assistance have formed the backbone of Beijing's public justification for an expanded presence in the IOR. Many of the PLA's major investments in capabilities and platforms plainly support these mission objectives.

The PLAN's capabilities and tempo of operational deployments arguably already overmatch the actual threats posed to China by piracy in the Gulf of Aden. (Nuclear-powered submarines are, for example, not a particularly specialised or effective counterpiracy platform.) The nearly continuous deployments in that theatre since 2008 have allowed the PLA to develop a small but highly trained force capable of tracking and interdicting hijackers and carrying out basic escort duties for commercial transport vessels.[34] Although it is unlikely to serve as a model for other bases due to its unique politics, the facility at Djibouti allows the PLA to more easily sustain these deployments by providing basic resupply, replenishment, and other logistic support.[35] In practice, this should allow PLAN vessels to sustain greater operational time in theatre, and reduce reliance on friendly port calls for resupply.

Many of the same far seas sustainment capabilities that the PLAN has cultivated in its counterpiracy missions have value for humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) activities as well. China has utilised its *Peace Ark* hospital ship for goodwill missions in the IOR, and the PLA has been able to undertake basic search-and-rescue and limited humanitarian airlift missions in response to disasters.[36]

The PLA has also built limited capabilities for non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO), which it would presumably use in support of Chinese citizens who are living abroad or supporting BRI investment projects in the region. These capabilities were put to the test in 2011 with a large-scale evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya, and again in 2015 with an evacuation from Yemen to Djibouti.[37] Unlike its earlier experience in Somalia in the early 1990s, the PLA did not have to rely on merchant vessels for transport of non-combatants.

What would it look like were China to expand its ability to undertake these kinds of non-combat missions? The PLA would presumably continue to increase the number and availability of hospital ships; use its base at Djibouti to stockpile humanitarian supplies; or conduct more complex amphibious exercises focused on force protection efforts against non-state actors, which would be particularly relevant for counterpiracy missions and NEO efforts conducted in non-permissive or politically unstable environments in the Middle East or Africa.[38]

Other capabilities that China might reasonably bring to bear in non-combat missions in the IOR, however, are ineluctably dual-use and could be leveraged for more sensitive missions or even combat activities. These include general sustainment

capabilities such as fleet supply and long-range communications, as well as more specific capabilities such as expansion of long-range airlift assets; use of amphibious ships and ship-to-shore operations involving rotary lift assets; military engineering activities, including rapid runway repair; and intermediate medical or mortuary facilities at Djibouti.[39] Although China already has access to the Port of Karachi, it could negotiate additional access at Gwadar to support its counterpiracy efforts or potentially stockpile supplies for humanitarian emergencies. Such access would provide the PLA with advantages in pursuing higher-order missions as well.

Counterterrorism operations

The second set of far seas missions that the PLA may be expected to conduct in the IOR involve counterterrorism (CT) activities, undertaken unilaterally or with partners, against organisations that threaten China. A 2015 law provides a broad legal architecture for the PLA to deploy overseas on CT missions.[40] At present, however, China's ability to conduct such operations in the region is limited by the PLA's modest assets in theatre. Any efforts to undertake CT operations on foreign soil could also invite political complications for China, given its longstanding but increasingly dubious insistence that it does not interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries.[41]

To date, Chinese CT activities have primarily involved cooperative CT exercises and activities with allies and partners, principally with Pakistan and, multilaterally, under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.[42] The nature and scope of China's CT-related activities remain opaque, though much of it is probably limited to bilateral and multilateral intelligence exchange, and, reportedly, joint operations against Uighur separatist groups along the mountainous China-Pakistan border.[43] Chinese special operations forces have also occasionally been deployed overseas in conjunction with counterpiracy missions. According to some reports, the PLA is "developing its special operations capabilities to build a more flexible and deployable force that can support missions abroad".[44] This might, for example, involve hostage rescue efforts deployed from PLAN platforms, or partnered operations against terrorist groups which target BRI infrastructure projects.

Higher along the conflict spectrum, one could imagine the PLA someday undertaking more dramatic unilateral CT activities from its offshore naval platforms in the Indian Ocean of the kind dramatised rather outlandishly in the 2018 Chinese blockbuster *Operation Red Sea*. Some of the PLAN's major surface combatants are equipped with long-range land-attack cruise missiles and the service has "invested heavily in a range of sensors and datalinks to enable over-the-horizon targeting" that could, in theory, be used against on-shore CT targets.[45] Any such ship-to-surface

strikes against CT targets would, even in the context of a partnered operation, be predicated on a dramatic change in China's political calculation and risk acceptance.

Intelligence collection

The third broad mission objective that we might expect the PLA to pursue in the IOR involves collecting intelligence in support of operational requirements and against key adversaries. Intelligence-related activities are by nature opaque, but we can infer that they take several forms.

The most significant and sustained type of collection would likely be of tactical and operational maritime domain intelligence that could directly support non-combat as well as more advanced PLAN operations. Already the PLAN is presumed to have used its submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean to map key underwater topographic features and possibly assess the vulnerability of undersea cables.[46] China can also leverage civilian vessels, including fishing boats, for this sort of collection.[47] In 2019, the Indian Navy expelled a Chinese civilian research vessel from India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an important maritime choke point. Its research activities likely produced oceanographic information of value to both civilian researchers and military planners.[48] The submarine deployments, along with the more recent use of unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), stand to provide the PLAN not only with more detailed information of the physical operating environment, but intelligence as to the patterns of operation and tactical behaviours of the Indian and other navies operating in the IOR.[49] This information is likely augmented by other PLA collection activities in the region, such as the occasional deployment into the Indian Ocean of electronic surveillance ships (such as Type 815 vessels) equipped to map the electronic signatures of vessels and aircraft.[50]

The most consequential intelligence collection investment that the Chinese military could make in the IOR would involve addressing its vulnerabilities in maritime domain awareness (MDA) along critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs), including near the choke point of the Strait of Malacca, and along routes leading to alternative choke points such as the Sunda or Lombok straits. Doing so would likely require investing in MDA capabilities of countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, or Sri Lanka, with the intent of leveraging those capabilities for the PLA's own collection efforts; establishing signals intelligence collection sites; and establishing realistic platforms and concepts of operation for the use of maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) near these SLOCs.[51] MPA sorties could be facilitated by some sort of rotational access agreement from a friendly country in the Bay of Bengal or the Gulf of Thailand – such as from Chinese-constructed airfields at Hambantota in

Sri Lanka; or Ream and Dara Sakor in Cambodia – though agreements of this kind could no doubt invite Indian recriminations on the host country.

These more complex MDA collection efforts would certainly be useful for facilitating the PLA's non-combat operations in the region, but more importantly, would also prove valuable for higher-order missions designed to thwart sea denial efforts or hold adversaries' assets at risk during a serious crisis.[52] (A robust MDA posture would, of course, only prove operationally useful to the PLA in a crisis if it had built out air defence platforms, strike assets, and other enabling capabilities allowing it to act on its maritime domain information.)

Support to coercive diplomacy

The fourth potential mission objective that the PLA may be called on to pursue in the IOR would involve supporting Chinese efforts aimed at coercive diplomacy toward small countries in the region. Needless to say, this is not a mission objective previewed in the public doctrinal literature. Nor is it one that is likely to feature prominently, at least in the near term, in the PLA's planning or development of capabilities in the IOR.

India and its partners, however, have good reason to be concerned in general terms about Chinese efforts at coercing smaller states. In East and Southeast Asia, for example, China has used its economic leverage to pressure countries to oppose recognition of Taiwan or secure other political objectives; has used boycotts and restrictions on Chinese tourism flows to coerce or punish countries with whom it has disputes; and has used so-called "grey zone" tactics, fishing fleets and maritime militias to harass and coerce countries with whom it has contested maritime claims.[53]

While China does not have contested maritime claims in the region, PLAN or China Coast Guard vessels could, nonetheless, be used to harass or intimidate small countries, or conduct show of force activities during a political crisis.[54] Merely anchoring a PLAN surface combatant just beyond the territorial waters of a small island country, such as Maldives, would send a powerful message – not only to Maldivian leaders, but to India, which sees itself as the Indian Ocean's natural hegemon. Using the PLA for this kind of signalling in locales so far from China's near seas would most likely prove politically counterproductive over the long term, but doing so would not require any specialised military capabilities beyond what China already has in the region.

Operations in a conflict environment

At the high end of the operational spectrum, China would likely want to be able to undertake effective operations in a conflict environment against state adversaries.

This could take many forms, but would presumably involve two principal and at times related missions: the ability to deter, mitigate, or terminate a state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China; and to meaningfully hold at risk the assets of India or its partners in the event of a wider conflict.[55]

China already has established some limited ability to deter a blockade or other interdiction of trade by a state adversary. It could, first, use PLAN assets in theatre to escort commercial vessels. The PLAN has gained some experience doing this with its counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, but in a scenario in which the purpose was deterring state-sponsored interdiction, Chinese military escorts would be forced to operate in a more expansive geographic domain (i.e. in both the eastern and western areas of the Indian Ocean) and with significantly heightened risk to the fleet and to wider military escalation. Second, China could seek to deter trade interdiction with show of force missions, hoping that a sizable and timely deployment of major surface combatants and submarines in the Indian Ocean would prompt India or the US to reconsider plans to disrupt Chinese commercial traffic. As PLAN deployments in the Indian Ocean grow, China will likely be able to generate more constructive ambiguity about its presence, activities, and retaliatory options – all of which might, at the margins, dissuade attempts at commercial interdiction.

China can take some comfort from the substantial literature that suggests that effectively prosecuting a naval blockade, or even a sustained and economically meaningful campaign of harassment against China-bound commercial vessels, would be a formidable task for the US and its partners in the region.[56] Accounting even for the deference, or active support, of the US and Australia, sustaining a blockade would be fraught, inviting difficult questions about how and where to confront PLAN escort vessels, how to ensure that oil is not sold to China once it passes through the eastern Indian Ocean choke points, how to protect against Chinese submarines, and, most vexingly, how to pre-empt the flow of PLAN reinforcements into the Indian Ocean theatre.

Even apart from a blockade, however, Chinese forces in the IOR would face significant vulnerabilities in any serious conflict.[57] The geography of the Indian Ocean and its choke points are such that the PLA would have long and fragile supply lines, subject to disruption by Indian, US, or other partner forces.[58] Lacking maritime domain awareness platforms, wide-area air defence, sophisticated anti-submarine warfare capabilities, or maritime strike capabilities, Chinese naval vessels in theatre would be vulnerable to shore-based aircraft, and would be at a notable information disadvantage, particularly near crucial maritime choke points.[59] Absent robust, politically sustainable, and operationally resilient basing arrangements in the region, Chinese forces would struggle to resupply fuel and other vital materials, undertake more than perfunctory refit and repair, or manage casualties.[60] China's logistics facility

at Djibouti and its presumed access to naval facilities at Karachi would, of course, be helpful.[61] If the PLA ever established a full-fledged naval base at Gwadar with layered defences, that would be more helpful still, particularly in mitigating threats to Chinese vessels transiting the Gulf of Oman. But even with these facilities, the PLA would struggle to manage resupply and repair activities in a contested environment, especially in the eastern Indian Ocean where the threat to Chinese-bound maritime traffic might prove most acute.[62]

Policy implications

Although India and its partners are suspicious of China's emerging capabilities in the Indian Ocean region, many of them are explicable given China's understandable interests in protecting the increasing number of Chinese nationals far from its shores; supporting the growth and security of large-scale Belt and Road investment projects; and mitigating the inherent fragility of China's energy supply lines. Indeed, some of China's most visible capabilities in the IOR – including regular naval deployments, the base at Djibouti, and military exercises – can justifiably support a wide range of non-combat operations and humanitarian contingency plans.

At the same time, some of these capabilities that are valuable for lower-end, non-combat missions could prove valuable for higher-end missions, including counterterrorism operations, more robust intelligence collection activities, political coercion, and certain operations in a conflict environment.[63] The challenge is in distinguishing which kinds of Chinese investments in the region could meaningfully be leveraged for higher-end military missions. Here we can draw two broad observations.

The first is that while there are reasons to be concerned about the prospect of China exerting coercive economic and political influence over small states in the IOR, many of its high-profile investments and activities, such as those at port facilities, are not easily convertible into meaningful military advantages.[64] Access arrangements that are grounded in economic coercion are unlikely to be politically stable or strategically reliable. In some countries, such as Sri Lanka, even commercial investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises and occasional ship visits by PLAN vessels have already proven to be politically fraught.

China already leverages its investments, enterprises and shipping companies to supplement PLAN logistics in non-conflict environments.[65] And it is plausible that China could take advantage of coercive economic leverage over countries in the IOR to establish access arrangements, or at the very least to complicate Indian, US, or partner country security relationships in the region.[66] (This might include military access arrangements at new locations such as the strategically located Gwadar port.) But what the PLA would likely want in order to enable higher-end missions – e.g. a resilient, hardened logistics hub with prepositioned military supplies – would go far

beyond a commercial venture or intermittent naval access, and would incur for China the kinds of reputational risks that come with effectively abjuring its longstanding discourse of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states.[67]

The second observation is that, notwithstanding some scepticism about the military utility of China's commercial activities in the region, there *are* indeed investments that could foreshadow China's intention and capability to be able to operate high-end military missions that threaten the interests of India and its partners.[68]

As the PLAN's surface and subsurface fleets grow in size and sophistication, most experts consider it inevitable that the navy will continue to increase its deployments to the IOR. Such deployments will likely continue to be publicly justified on the basis of non-combat activities, even as they provide capabilities that, at times, vastly overmatch the mission requirements for counterpiracy, non-combatant evacuation, and humanitarian assistance. The capability overmatch would be even more pronounced if, as analysts anticipate, the PLAN someday deploys at regular intervals a carrier strike group with a substantial air wing and wide-area tactical air control. Such deployments only make sense as efforts to build "soft power" influence in the region; establish platforms for more routine and robust intelligence collection; exercise operational capabilities valuable for higher-end missions; and position assets in the region that can be used for political signalling and coercive show of force operations.[69]

Operating in a conflict environment in the IOR would also require the PLA to obtain more robust platforms for intelligence collection. Mitigating its collection disadvantages, particularly around key choke points, would likely require the regular, even if not persistent, use of long-range manned or unmanned maritime patrol aircraft. In the absence of permanent bases outside Djibouti, such aircraft could be operated occasionally from PLAN flattops in theatre or from rotational access agreements that Beijing might strike with friendly countries, possibly in conjunction with MDA information-exchange arrangements.[70] Such arrangements would be, from the vantage point of the PLAN, imperfect, intermittent, politically contingent, and likely easily targeted from the Indian mainland, but would nonetheless signal a serious effort by Beijing to build intelligence collection capabilities for higher-order missions.

More notable still as a signal of PLA intentions would be efforts to bolster resilience in the IOR. As noted above, Chinese personnel, equipment, and investment projects would at present be highly vulnerable to disruption in the event of a serious conflict.[71] The surest sign that the PLA is building capabilities for higher-end missions focused on potential state adversaries would be efforts to invest in specialised warehouses for prepositioning military equipment and ordnance, or construction and deployment of multiple afloat prepositioning vessels in theatre; building or securing access

to robust repair, resupply, and refuelling facilities, including ones tailored for submarines; hardening existing facilities at Djibouti; establishing robust medical and mortuary services; deploying secure and redundant area-wide communications and command-and-control systems, perhaps with dedicated satellites; and investing in other capabilities that are primarily oriented toward force protection against state adversaries.[72] Most, if not all, of these kinds of investments would be visible and difficult to establish under purely commercial cover. Some of these capabilities could be secured with some discretion at shared or dedicated facilities at Karachi or eventually Gwadar, but China would find it challenging to hide for long a military-grade logistics hub on foreign soil.[73]

To conclude, there is good reason for states operating in the IOR to be concerned about the growing Chinese presence there. Chinese investments are providing Beijing with new and sometimes troubling forms of economic and political leverage; China's political and military leadership have publicised formal requirements for the PLA to protect China's overseas interests; the military has stepped up its deployments in the region and will likely take advantage of some of its most advanced naval technologies for far seas missions; and the PLA has gained a foothold at Djibouti that, even if it is not a template for future bases, signals an interest in investing in military logistics capabilities. As China pays more attention to the IOR and deploys more forces to the region, the likelihood of misperceptions is bound to increase, including the prospect that Chinese actions designed to defend narrow interests in its far seas are read as efforts to hold at risk the military assets of its competitor states.[74]

China may be many years away from having the ability to operate effectively against state adversaries in a conflict environment in the IOR. But India, the US, Australia, and other like-minded partners would do well to watch for the development of specific Chinese capabilities in the region that plainly overmatch the requirements of humanitarian and counterpiracy missions; for efforts to establish more persistent intelligence collection against state adversaries, particularly in the maritime domain; and for efforts to improve the resilience of China's fragile supply lines and logistics networks far from its home waters.

Notes: chapter 3

1 Parts of this chapter have been adapted from Joshua T. White, "China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage" (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2020).

2 There are many possible ways of categorising the set of potential Chinese missions in the IOR. For a more comprehensive attempt at categorising potential PLA missions see Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, "China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 27, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR893.html. There are also other possible mission sets that this paper does not address, which may become relevant if China's policies and doctrines significantly evolve. These could include meaningful PLA support for multinational military missions conducted in or against a third country; or Chinese military interventions in regional conflicts in the Indian Ocean, Africa, or the Middle East.

3 Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, "China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions," (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2010), 11, accessed 28 October 2024. https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/717794/chinas-out-of-area-naval-operations-case-studies-trajectories-obstacles-and-pot/; Patrick M. Cronin, Mira Rapp-Hooper, Harry Krejsa, Alexander Sullivan, and Rush Doshi, "Beyond the San Hai: The Challenge of China's Blue-Water Navy" (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017), 51 accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/beyond-the-san-hai

4 Christopher D. Yung and Ross Rustici, "China's Out of Area Naval Operations," 14.

5 Srikanth Kondapalli, "China's Evolving Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean Region: An Indian Perspective," in *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, ed. by David Brewster, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113.

6 Daniel M. Hartnett, "The 'New Historic Missions': Reflections on Hu Jintao's Military Legacy," in *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. by Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 31–80 accessed 28 October 2024. https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2273.pdf; Christopher H. Sharman, "China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Towards a New Maritime Strategy," (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 72, accessed 28 October 2024. https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/717696/china-moves-out-stepping-stones-toward-a-new-maritime-strategy/

7 Srikanth Kondapalli, "China's Evolving Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean Region," 114.

8 David Brewster, "A Contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean," in *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, ed. by David Brewster (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

9 Christopher H. Sharman, "China Moves Out," 5; Srikanth Kondapalli, "China's Evolving Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean Region," 114.

10 Academy of Military Science, Science of Military Strategy (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 246. See English translation, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf?ver=NxAWg4BPw_NylEjxaha8Aw%3d%3d

11 M. Taylor Fravel, "A 'World-Class' Military: Assessing China's Global Military Ambitions," Testimony, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 20

June 2019, 9, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Fravel_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf.

12 "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), 19, accessed 28 October 2024. https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/14/2002079292/-1/-1/1/EXPANDING-GLOBAL-ACCESS-REPORT-FINAL.PDF; Elsa Kania and Peter Wood, "Major Themes in China's 2019 National Defense White Paper," (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 31 July 2019), 18–24, accessed 28 October 2024. https://jamestown.org/program/major-themes-in-chinas-2019-national-defense-white-paper/

13 China's public defence documents are often oblique about its staggering dependence on energy imports, but the context is obvious: over 80 per cent of China's oil imports transit the Strait of Malacca, and about 40 per cent transit the Strait of Hormuz. David Brewster, "A Contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean," 4; Jeffrey Becker, Erica Downs, Ben DeThomas, and Patrick deGategno, "China's Presence in the Middle East and Western Indian Ocean: Beyond Belt and Road," (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2019), 11, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2018-U-018309-Final2.pdf

14 This chapter refers to "out of area", "far seas," and "expeditionary" capabilities interchangeably. The US military defines an expeditionary force simply as "an armed force organized to achieve a specific objective in a foreign country" (Joint Publication 3-0) though US Marine Corps doctrine notes that expeditionary activity often involves "the deployment of military forces to the scene of the crisis or conflict and their requisite support some significant distance from their home bases." "Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 3: Expeditionary Operations," (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 4 April 2018), accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%203.pdf?ver=2019-07-18-093631-287

15 Zach Vertin, "Great Power Rivalry in the Red Sea: China's Experiment in Djibouti and Implications for the United States," (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2020).

16 David Styan, "China's Maritime Silk Road and Small States: Lessons from the Case of Djibouti," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 122 (2020): 9, accessed 28 October 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1637567; "China's National Defense in the New Era," (Beijing: State Council, People's Republic of China, 24 July 2019), accessed 28 October 2024. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm

17 "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China: A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, as amended," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), 91, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF

18 For views on the carrier program see: You Ji, "A Grand Sino-Indian Game of 'Go,'" in *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, ed. by David Brewster (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 98.

19 "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win," (Washington, DC: U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 70, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf; Christopher D. Yung, "A 'World-Class' Military: Assessing China's Global Military Ambitions", Testimony, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 20 June 2019, 7, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Yung_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf. Indian press reports suggest that a Type 071 LPD has already been deployed in the Indian Ocean.

20 Larry Bond, Chris Carlson, and Peter Grining, eds., "China's Navy: Ships and Aircraft of the People's Republic of China, 1955–2021," (Admiralty Trilogy Group, 2021).

21 "China Military Power," U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 71–72; Swee Lean Collin Koh, "China–India Rivalry at Sea: Capability, Trends, and Challenges," in *India-China Maritime Competition: The Security Dilemma at Sea*, ed. by Rajesh Basrur, T.V. Paul, and Anit Mukherjee (London: Routledge, 2019), 40; Jeffrey Becker, Erica Downs, Ben DeThomas, and Patrick deGategno, "China's Presence in the Middle East and Western Indian Ocean," 76; Conor M. Kennedy, "China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection," (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, December 2019), 6, accessed 28 October 2024. https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/4/

22 Iskander Rehman, "The Subsurface Dimension of Sino-Indian Maritime Rivalry," in *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, ed. by David Brewster (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 138.

23 Andrew Scobell, Bonny Lin, Howard J. Shatz, Michael Johnson, Larry Hanauer, Michael S. Chase, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Ivan W. Rasmussen, Arthur Chan, Aaron Strong, Eric Warner, and Logan Ma, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 142, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2273.html; "China Military Power," U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 51, 72–73.

24 See Michael S. Chase and Cristina L. Garafola, "China's Search for a 'Strategic Air Force,'" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2016): 4–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1068165; Timothy R. Heath, "China's Pursuit of Overseas Security" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 28, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2271/RAND_RR2271.pdf; Kristen Gunness, "The Dawn of a PLA Expeditionary Force?" in *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, ed. by Nadège Rolland (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 41–42. For more on air force competition in the IOR, see chapter 6 (A US perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean).

25 See for example: Patrick M. Cronin, Mira Rapp-Hooper, Harry Krejsa, Alexander Sullivan and Rush Doshi, "Beyond the San Hai," 26; Raja Menon, "Scenarios for China's Naval Deployment in the Indian Ocean and India's Naval Response," in *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, ed. by David Brewster (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 131; Christopher D. Yung, "A 'World-Class' Military," 14.

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to influence the political calculations of another government, or to support or oppose one faction in a country that is politically split, or even fighting a civil war". Dennis C. Blair, "Chinese Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests", Testimony, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 20 February 2020, 4, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blair_Written%20Testimony.pdf. The recent China Coast Guard Law, passed by the National People's Congress in January 2021, has also prompted concerns that the Coast Guard might – sooner or later – construe its vaguely defined jurisdiction to include the authority to operate in Indian Ocean littoral regions. See Shigeki Sakamoto, "China's New Coast Guard Law and Implications for Maritime Security in the East and South China Seas," *Lawfare* (blog), 16 February 2021, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.lawfareblog.com/chinas-new-coast-guard-law-and-implications-maritime-security-east-and-south-china-seas

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Hormuz. David Brewster, "The Red Flag Follows Trade: China's Future as an Indian Ocean Power," 199–200.

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67 See for example: David Brewster, "A Contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean," 16; Timothy R. Heath, "China's Pursuit of Overseas Security," 30; Isaac Kardon, "A 'World-Class' Military."

68 As Nilanthi Samaranayake notes in chapter 1, U.S. policy planners worry that Chinese presence in the IOR might eventually divert U.S. defence resources from East Asia and other priority theatres.

69 Some analysts have suggested that heightened PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean during the Doklam standoff in 2017 constituted an intentional show of force effort by the Chinese military. You Ji, "A Grand Sino-Indian Game of 'Go,'" 94; Swee Lean Collin Koh, "China–India Rivalry at Sea," 42.

70 Note, for example, the US Department of Defense's official speculation about China's likely ambitions to secure rotational presence access arrangements. Gwadar would be a natural candidate site for the PLA to experiment with rotational deployments of maritime patrol aircraft, possibly in combined operations with the Pakistan military. Such an arrangement would likely invite criticism from many quarters – including from within Pakistan itself. "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access," U.S. Department of Defense, 3.

71 Chinese analysts are well aware of the fragility of their existing logistics capabilities in far seas operations. See Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation*, 91. David Brewster notes that about half of the

erstwhile Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean Region was comprised of logistics ships. David Brewster, "The Red Flag Follows Trade," 202.

72 On this point, the US Department of Defense speculates that China might seek to co-locate PLA logistics facilities with commercial ports, a prospect which would be operationally advantageous but politically challenging. "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access," U.S. Department of Defense, 4. See also "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2023," U.S. Department of Defense, 154. For an account of Chinese views of prepositioning materiel, see Kevin McCauley, "Chinese Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests", Testimony, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 20 February 2020, 15, accessed 28 October 2024. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/McCauley_Written%20Testimony_0.pdf

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4

Australian maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean

JAMES GOLDRICK[1]

Introduction

The Indian Ocean and its littoral is one of the most complex maritime regions in the contemporary world. This chapter assesses Australia's maritime strategy and the way Australia must respond to a wide range of challenges, not all of which can be considered in a purely naval or even security-focused context. The judgement underpinning the analysis is that the Indian Ocean will, despite China's rise and its assertive behaviour in other regions, be a theatre of strategic competition rather than itself a cause of conflict and that Australia must act accordingly.

Four major themes will be addressed: why the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is so complex for maritime actors and why it calls for such care with the approach that Australia takes; how critical the evolving partnership with India is for Australia in the IOR; the importance of sustaining the complex relationship with the United States at the same time as Australia makes the best use of its limited resources to pursue its own interests; and, throughout the analysis, the need for tailored and judicious management of Australia's relations with all the region's actors.

A complex offshore tapestry

Australia's maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean is closely bound up with both state-based challenges and transnational, non-state threats. In some ways, the latter are the more urgent. In particular, the prospect of a resumption of unauthorised

maritime arrivals on Australia's north-west coasts would be of such concern to the Australian government that it would immediately become the operational imperative in any situation short of great power conflict. Even now, guarding the north-western approaches of the Australian continent remains the priority for Australia's Maritime Border Command. The realities that the region is complicated, that many events are beyond Australia's possible control, and that the nation and its maritime actors must pursue many different lines of effort are inherent to formulating any practical maritime security strategy.

Furthermore, although there is considerable uncertainty over the Indian Ocean maritime activities of China in particular, it is most likely that any strategic competition in the IOR would escalate to conflict only as the result of events elsewhere. The truth is that China, a newly maritime-dependent power, is as anxious to maintain the safety of the shipping routes to and from the Middle East and Europe as any of the other major actors, a requirement labelled, not wholly accurately, as its 'Malacca Dilemma'. Australia's 'dilemma' in these circumstances is how to balance cooperation with China and accommodation when Australia is acting to protect its own legitimate maritime interests including by pushing back at coercive behaviour, particularly – as in the South China Sea – when China contravenes the accepted provisions of the Law of the Sea.

Australia needs to be alert to particular challenges in working with key regional partners. For example, although Indonesia is even more resource constrained in the maritime domain than either Australia or India, it resents any suggestion that it is a mendicant. Indonesia is also wary of any potential military entanglements, its own tradition of non-alignment not having come under the same pressure as India's, despite events in the South China Sea. Australia must at all times be alert to any possibility that its strategic declarations, defence force structure and actions are not construed as being aimed against neighbouring Indonesia, even when the actual target might be China. Furthermore, any efforts to increase cooperation with Indonesia, as well as with nations such as Malaysia and Thailand, must not be framed in ways that seem to aim directly at countering China.

In formulating its approach, Australia must also be sensitive to the differences between its situation in the South West Pacific and the Indian Ocean. In the Pacific, it is the security provider to many of the small Pacific Island nations, while in much of the Indian Ocean the lead naturally goes to India. Australia can help, but such assistance needs to be clearly complementary and not competitive. Matters are simplified when Australia itself is deriving a direct benefit, as in the case of its close relationship with Sri Lanka, driven substantially by the desire to prevent people smuggling and illegal boat arrives to Australia.

To be fully effective, therefore, Australia's maritime strategy must span the spectrum of conflict at the same time as it manages a web of complex relationships and partnerships, actual and potential. What the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic will be on Australia's intentions remains unclear. The immediate results have been to disrupt many of the plans for regional engagement, but of more concern must be the long-term problems that may result from the disruptions to so many national economies – as well as the potential leap ahead in regional influence that China's early recovery may involve.

In military terms, Australia's alliance with the United States will remain an essential element of its maritime strategy for the region, although there must be a degree of uncertainty over the IOR's place in Washington's overall priorities, given the increasing pressure from both China and Russia in other theatres and America's own reduced reliance on Middle East oil. Another uncertainty, because it relates so closely to many of the concerns Australia has over China's attitude towards international law, has been the future of the US base at Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, a British dependency claimed by Mauritius and of which the prior inhabitants have been dispossessed. Australia is aware of the importance of maintaining Diego Garcia as the US forward base in the region but can be in no doubt of the need for a diplomatic settlement.

The Australia-India maritime security relationship

Many of Australia's maritime goals, particularly those related to balancing China, will depend upon the development of its partnership with India. This has made significant progress in recent years and measures of cooperation continue to evolve. An agreement for the exchange of information on commercial ('white') shipping has been in place for some time, while India and Australia signed a new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in June 2020.[2] This high-level arrangement was given immediate useful form in the shape of a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement and a Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement.[3] Both are likely to have significant maritime elements, notably for naval and air operations through the availability of bases for the refuelling and maintenance of each partner's units.

What was even more significant about the meeting between the Indian and Australian prime ministers in June 2020 was that it resulted in a Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. This set out a range of measures, including a commitment to "deepen navy-to-navy cooperation and strengthen maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific region through enhanced exchange of information. Both countries will also work to enhance civil maritime cooperation between law enforcement agencies and coast guard cooperation".[4]

It is thus not surprising that naval cooperation has developed apace, not just with Australia's inclusion in India's multinational naval exercise MALABAR in November 2020 alongside US and Japanese units in an overt demonstration of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) cooperation, but in other interactions that have achieved new levels of interoperability. The third annual Australian INDO-PACIFIC ENDEAVOUR deployment, which started early in 2019, followed the Australian Defence Minister's declaration in December 2018 that engagement with India was to be a key activity in an operation focused on the IOR.[5] The task group included the large amphibious ship HMAS *Canberra*, accompanied by the replenishment ship HMAS *Success* and the frigates HMAS *Newcastle* and HMAS *Parramatta*. It was a Joint endeavour in every sense, including Army personnel and equipment embarked in HMAS *Canberra,* as well as a P8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft from the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), and it was led by a RAAF senior officer.

The third biennial AUSINDEX exercise took place in the Bay of Bengal in April 2019 and included for the first time an RAAF P8A Poseidon. This joined the Indian Navy P8I aircraft that had taken part in previous serials. What was even more significant was that the four-day exercise also included the Australian submarine HMAS *Collins* and the Indian Kilo-class submarine INS *Sindhukirti.* The involvement of these units put the exercise on a new level of complexity, as well as mutual trust. The program included submarine-on-submarine tracking and attacks, which require complex and difficult tactics,[6] as well as strict safety precautions.

Further Australian-Indian naval cooperation may well be shaped by the evolution of the Quad partnership. In particular, all four nations must be interested in developing greater confidence in their ability to deal with China's submarines. It was no surprise that AUSINDEX was accompanied by the near-simultaneous first joint US Navy-India anti-submarine warfare exercise, involving P8s from both nations, as well as the US destroyer USS *Spruance*.[7] The Japanese have also confirmed their desire for "working with high-end navies".[8] More to the point, such exercises reveal much to each protagonist some of the most critical and highly classified offensive and defensive capabilities in each other's maritime force structure. Even to engage in such activities therefore indicates a degree of mutual trust.

Australian-Indian cooperation was manifest in other ways in 2019. Australia's Naval Advisor in New Delhi later reported that the Indian Navy had responded quickly and effectively in providing medical assistance to Australian sailors, a contingency that required clearances to move people ashore to Indian facilities, which had not always been so rapidly or easily obtained in the past.[9]

Australia hosted the 2021 AUSINDEX in the Northern Australia Exercise Area. In early 2021, Australia placed a Navy liaison officer in India's Information Fusion

Centre, an organisation established in 2018 to monitor shipping in the IOR. This step received favourable attention in the Indian press.[10]

Nevertheless, the reality of the Australia-India maritime relationship is that both partners are constrained by the available resources and competing demands and there must be some uncertainty as to whether the pace will be maintained. India has yet to achieve a proper balance between its maritime commitments and preoccupation with land border threats. India's strategic culture has both a historical and contemporary fixation with Pakistan and the north, one only reinforced by the current tensions with China over the much-disputed boundary line in the Himalayas and China's efforts to increase its influence in nations such as Nepal.

Furthermore, not only is the Indian Army the dominant service in mass, budget, and political influence, but the recent moves to improve joint command and control have only confirmed Indian Navy fears about creating the post of Chief of Defence Staff with accompanying leadership authority. The first appointment, of General Rawat in 2020, is most likely to be followed by another Indian Army officer. Comments from the Indian Chief of Defence Staff about the desirability of focusing on sea denial strategies have implications for force structure.[11] Although a Maritime Command has reportedly been now agreed, at least in principle,[12] a tendency in setting up the new theatre commands to treat maritime forces as merely protectors of the Army's seaward flank has done little to instil confidence. Furthermore, the Indian Navy's share of the budget, already relatively small, is under pressure. [13] India's Minister for Defence has asserted that the Indian Navy will play the most important role of the three services in the future, but increases in its budget have yet to be made.[14]

Finally, the traditional mindset of 'non-alignment' so closely associated with India's independent role as a leading power in Asia remains a powerful influence in New Delhi's political and security establishments, notwithstanding the recent evolution of the Quad partnership with the US, Japan, and Australia. All this means that Australia must tread carefully and patiently – and be careful to avoid the Australian tendency to lose focus on the relationship, which has occurred in the past and greatly irritated many in India. In the long term, both resource-constrained nations must be ready to devote sufficient effort to meeting their shared maritime challenges.

Despite the Quad arrangements, the United States represents another potential constraint on closer Indian and Australian naval and maritime air cooperation, since both nations operate US equipment that is subject to bilateral restrictions on the disclosure of information to a third party. New Delhi and Washington signed a Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement in 2018 that may help clear away some restrictions. Certainly, the United States has as close an interest in achieving improved regional maritime domain awareness as Australia and India and

there may be opportunities for back-room arrangements for information sharing. At the working level for both navies, having a secure communications arrangement (preferably multilateral) would also allow Indian units to much more easily join – as well as, and it will often be appropriate – command combined task forces.[15] This could be particularly useful in short-notice contingencies when units must be rapidly assembled, deployed, and put to work, without the benefit of detailed planning or rehearsals.

One potential bilateral activity would be the institution of coordinated surveillance flights by Indian and Australian maritime patrol aircraft, utilising each other's airfields, such as on the Cocos and Andaman Islands as well as the mainlands. This has been suggested by commentators, who have noted that such cooperation has already taken place between France and India.[16] Australia's own Operation GATEWAY maritime surveillance program has been conducted as part of the Malaysia-Australia Joint Defence Program since 1981. During the Cold War this operation focused on Soviet naval activity in and around the Malacca Strait, but in recent times has received more attention for its South China Sea aspect and the resulting interactions of Australian maritime patrol aircraft and Chinese forces. Nevertheless, the operation retains the additional northern Indian Ocean focus that was a part of the patrols from their start during the Cold War.[17] It also provides a useful precedent for embarking foreign personnel (in that case Malaysian personnel) in aircraft to accompany surveillance missions.

In the meantime, Australia's maritime security partnership with Sri Lanka will continue. Visits have been exchanged between senior personnel from Australia and Sri Lanka. In 2017 the Australian Border Force's patrol vessel, the 8,000 tonne ABFC *Ocean Shield* visited Sri Lanka and India to "share expertise" with the Sri Lankan Navy and the Indian Coast Guard.[18] In 2018, the patrol boat transfer to Sri Lanka was followed up by the handover of spare engines. In March 2019, Australia's minehunter HMAS *Diamantina* and the hydrographic vessel HMAS *Leeuwin* conducted an unsuccessful search with the Sri Lankans for the wreck of the Australian destroyer HMAS *Vampire*, sunk near Sri Lanka in April 1942 by Japanese carrier aircraft.[19] The point is that Australia's provision of aid, notably the transfer of the patrol boats, and its other activities have been recognised by India as a clear quid pro quo for Sri Lankan cooperation over people smuggling and not a bid for increased strategic influence in India's own backyard.[20]

Leveraging limited resources in the Indian Ocean

Australia's own Indian Ocean posture is at greater sustained levels than at any previous time of peace, but it still has limitations. Some reflect the inevitable competition for resources, particularly the need for a significant naval presence in both Southeast Asia

and the Southwest Pacific. This means that the five frigates and six submarines based at HMAS *Stirling* south of Perth spend much of their time in other theatres. On the other hand, while *Stirling* itself is a very capable base that also serves to support frequent US warship visits (it is one of the relatively few Australian ports cleared to accept nuclear-powered units), there are no significant naval facilities between it and Darwin. There are suggestions to develop the port of Broome in the north-west as at least a patrol boat base, but this has not been done. The need for improved facilities has at least been recognised for aircraft, with work soon to start to improve the airfield on Cocos Island[21], and modernisation intended of RAAF bases Curtin near Derby, Learmonth near Exmouth, and Pearce in southern Western Australia.

There have been suggestions of US interest in utilising Australian bases in addition to the current arrangements for the US Marine Corps in Darwin, something that federal authorities have encouraged in the past, a point confirmed again by Australia's Defence Minister in June 2021.[22] If this were to result in developments in the northwest, it would certainly be welcomed by both local and state authorities.[23] However desirable in strategic and operational terms, the prospect of such basing will be constrained by the limits of US resources. Australia is unlikely to provide the funds for the facilities permanent basing would require, while any US money is likely to be concentrated on Darwin.[24] There is a big difference between a port visit and what is required for base porting even the smallest ship, let alone a major combatant or a squadron of aircraft. In this regard, present arrangements using HMAS *Stirling* probably represent the most satisfactory solution in Western Australia. Projects such as the defences of Guam have a higher priority for US expenditure as Washington seeks to match China where it presents the most urgent threat.[25]

What is clear is that Australia's naval activities in recent times have been directly motivated much more by the need to assert Australia's interests in the region rather than, as in the recent past, a useful by-product of the requirement to transit from operations in the Middle East. Indeed, part of Australia's draw-down of naval deployments to the region that have been a recurrent, if not dominant theme of the last 30 years,[26] has been explicitly justified by the need to focus "on our immediate region: ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland Southeast Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific".[27] This will be a significant change to the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) commitments. Since 1990, there have been 68 ship deployments to the Middle East, the majority being individual units, but including several task groups.[28] In addition, Australia has provided command elements for some of the Combined Task Forces as well as staff and logistics personnel within and alongside the US Fifth Fleet organisation. The benefit of the reduction in effort will be seen in Australia's increased capacity

to deploy substantial national task groups as symbols of its independent efforts to maintain security and stability in the region.

A drawback, in purely naval terms, of the drawdown from the Middle East region will be the absence of opportunities for cooperation that involvement in the various Combined Task Forces in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Arabian Sea offered with navies such as that of Pakistan and the Middle East. Fora provided by the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Region Association, even when supplemented by gatherings such as the Heads of Asian Coastguard Agencies Meeting, can only be a partial substitute, however valuable they may be for making connections and canvassing issues of regional concern.

Australia's withdrawal from the western Indian Ocean, however, also highlights an abiding uncertainty in Australia's strategy: how far across the Indian Ocean should Australia attempt to operate? It retains a vital interest in the free passage of energy supplies from the Middle East, even if much of what it finally receives has been refined in Asia, and the dynamic situation in Africa may have geo-strategic implications for Australia itself. This interest was recognised, albeit to a limited extent, in the provision in 2020 of a frigate for a single rotation for the protection of shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Notably, the government made clear that the promise was only for a six-month deployment.[29] Given the tensions between Iran and the US and the abiding importance of the Strait of Hormuz, the possibility of Australia's help being sought and given in the future cannot be discounted.

The constraints on multi-national partnerships and the capacity challenges faced by so many of the Indian Ocean's littoral states suggest that alternative approaches may prove critical in achieving advances in maritime security. Non-government organisations have opened up new avenues for supporting maritime domain awareness, on occasion even providing surveillance and response units for nations without the resources to manage their own maritime zones.[30] In addition to its own research and aid projects, whether in cooperation with other donors or not,[31] Australia should be seeking to encourage such capacity building without strings, particularly in areas such as East Africa, where relatively small amounts of money could achieve a great deal. In this fashion, Australia could demonstrate its interest in ways that remain within its own capacity for action.

On the other hand (and the 2019 INDO-PACIFIC ENDEAVOUR deployment demonstrates this), there is renewed understanding of the need for Australia to demonstrate not only that it has sufficient national military capability to possess strategic weight, but that it is an independent actor in the region and not a 'deputy sheriff'. In addition to its Indian activities, the 2019 deployment took in key Southeast Asian countries – some of which, such as Thailand, are very much Indian Ocean states – and included operations in the South China Sea to demonstrate Australia's

continuing concern for developments in that region as well. The construct for the annual deployments, although disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, is that they will have a focus alternating between the IOR and the Pacific, with all deployments including the South China Sea. Given the new importance of AUSINDEX, this is likely to be the operational centrepiece of the Indian Ocean year, just as the biennial US-led multinational RIMPAC exercise around Hawaii is for the Pacific year.

Australia's other major multinational exercise, KAKADU, which is conducted around Darwin on a biennial basis, was cancelled for 2020, but resumed in 2022. This will be an important priority for Australia. No less than 28 nations took part in 2018 and the exercise represents a key opportunity to improve interoperability with several Indian Ocean nations, most notably Indonesia, in a littoral environment more appropriate to the capabilities it possess than the open ocean.

Nevertheless, the way ahead with Indonesia is likely to have greater maritime security and economic elements, notwithstanding Australia's explicit intent to increase the sophistication and extent of its naval and military engagements. Those priorities were reflected in a joint statement following the sixth Australia-Indonesia Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers' meeting in December 2019.[32] Australia and Indonesia stage regular bilateral exercises for both civil and naval security forces, as well as conducting coordinated patrols on the boundaries of the two nations' exclusive economic zones.[33] Here there may be potential for trilateral cooperation with India, since India already conducts parallel exercises and operations with Indonesia in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands region. Such joint maritime security operations probably have both greater immediate potential for the three-nation relationship than training for high-intensity work, but there is certainly value in pursuing improved maritime information exchange between the three nations that may have military dimensions in addition. A key emerging uncertainty for the maritime relationship may be the future of the maritime boundary between Australia and Indonesia. Resolution of Australia's long-running dispute with East Timor, largely in the latter's favour, may have created the opportunity for Indonesia to argue that the subject should be re-visited and the boundaries with Australia similarly adjusted in Indonesia's favour.[34] This matter will require careful handling.

European partnerships

The increased concern of major European powers for events in the Indo-Pacific and the security of the global maritime system is bringing with it additional opportunities for Australia to strengthen its partnerships and demonstrate its own capabilities. Australia and France have long cooperated closely to support surveillance and enforcement in the maritime zones of their Southern Ocean territories, particularly to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Recently, however, their

partnership has expanded to emphasise navy-to-navy collaboration for higher-intensity operations. This may have been in part been encouraged by the Franco-Australian submarine program (see postscript), but it also reflects France's desire to be an abiding influence in the region.

In 2021, this commitment took the form of the deployment of the *Jeanne D'Arc 2021* amphibious ready group (ARG) to the northeastern Indian Ocean, while a battle group centred on the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* operated in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. The ships of the French ARG did not visit any Australian ports, but their schedule included exercise *La Perouse*. In 2019, this exercise was conducted in the Bay of Bengal and involved French, US, Japanese, and Australian units. In 2021, ships of the four countries participated again, with additional support from other US Navy units.[35] The French 2021 task group commander made it clear that *"this willingness to deploy in this zone reinforces the partnerships we have with our key partners in the zone, which are Japan, Australia, India and the United States. During our presence in the zone for three months, we will work to strengthen these partnerships"*.[36] Such an approach is wholly in accord with Australia's efforts.

The deployments of other European powers are also welcome, but must be regarded with a degree of caution and not as a substitute for Australian capacity. Although such deployments are valuable signals of commitment to the global order, the limits of European capability mean that their substantial presence in the eastern Indian Ocean (let alone the Pacific) can only be temporary and contingent on there being no threats closer to home. The British despatch of the aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* to the region in the middle of 2021 must be viewed in this perspective, as should the subsequent visit by a German frigate.[37]

Conclusion

In all, Australia's future maritime strategy for the Indian Ocean and the part played in it by the RAN will continue to require a combination of assertion and restraint, as well as a readiness to work across the spectrum of maritime operations, from benign diplomatic activities to the exercise of military force and through both government and non-government mechanisms. The full maritime task has been described in other contexts as resulting in an 'offshore tapestry' and this concept has merit when the range of problems, interests and actors in the region is considered. Perhaps the key point remains, although there are many other potential sources of local and regional conflict within the IOR, that great power rivalries are likely to play out in competitive but not necessarily aggressive behaviour in the maritime domain. All the major actors have much at stake and each has a fair share of vulnerabilities. Australia has its own weaknesses, but is well positioned to play a constructive role in maintaining security and stability. The challenge above all will be to achieve the best balance in the

employment of its limited resources across its vast area of direct strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific, an area of which the Indian Ocean is only a part.

Postscript

Rory Medcalf

James Goldrick was a singularly respected expert in the Australian naval and wider maritime security communities. It is therefore difficult and unreasonable to presume precisely what he would have thought of developments in regional security since his passing in March 2023.

Events since the initial draft of this chapter in mid-2021 have largely borne out his analysis, including his acknowledgement of the limits to a leadership role for Australia in the Indian Ocean, and the need to take into account the concerns of a wide range of partners, notably Indonesia. Likewise, the 2024 UK announcement of a deal to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Lands to Mauritius is not out of step with his observation of the need to address the concerns of Indian Ocean states, even while he recognised Australia's strong interest in continued US force presence.

One major shift that needs to be noted is the September 2021 advent of AUKUS, the trilateral technology-sharing arrangement between Australia, the UK and the US, with its 'Pillar 1' priority of enabling Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. This initiative of the conservative government led by Scott Morrison was endorsed and carried forward by the Labor government of Anthony Albanese. Among its immediate consequences was damage to relations between Australia and France, given that a major contract for Australia's acquisition of French conventional submarines was scrapped in favour of AUKUS. This greatly reduced enthusiasm in Paris for wider Indo-Pacific maritime cooperation with Canberra, at least for the near term. However, the larger matter is what AUKUS might mean for Australia's overall Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean posture – underpinned by the basic question of the viability of such a massive capability ambition.

As a naval historian of global standing, James Goldrick had a perspective on AUKUS that was deeply informed by some of the grand naval ambitions of times past, and their under-fulfilment. In one of his last published writings, he cautioned of the major conditions in commitment and funding that would need to be met for AUKUS to be viable. He explored the 1923 plan for Australia to create a force of six submarines to support (UK-led) regional collective defence, and the 1947 effort to develop an independent capability for power projection based on seaborne fixed-wing aviation. That proposed submarine force failed fast: only two boats were acquired, and before long transferred to the British due to the unaffordability of sustaining them. The fixed-wing aviation experience may have more accurately foreshadowed the AUKUS challenge. A Fleet Air Arm was maintained until 1981, but:

> … the remainder of our maritime forces suffered. The difference this century is that such 'making do' cannot be enough. The lesson is obvious. If Australia is to embark on the SSN program, the bill in people, money and infrastructure must be understood and met from the first and in full.[38]

This observation remains telling as the politics, diplomacy and economics of AUKUS continue to be a matter of intense scrutiny and debate.

In contemplating future Australian Indian Ocean strategy, we can be confident that a Goldrick perspective would be one of prudence and broad-mindedness, recognising the need for sea denial and deterrence, to be sure, but tempered with the engagement of an array of partners and the need for a balanced force in the truest sense. In writing elsewhere of future naval requirements for India as well as Australia, James Goldrick and co-author Sudarshan Shrikhande noted that both countries would want to focus on ensuring their trade and energy flows in the Indian Ocean, even during conflict, and would need:

> … a force which not only provides the most possible options to government from the resources it makes available, but also effectively spans the full range of tasks on which first national survival and then key national interests depend.[39]

Notes: chapter 4

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5

A US perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean

DR BRENDAN S. MULVANEY

This chapter examines how the United States, and specifically the US military, conceptualises air power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It first provides an overview of US air power in this region, then provides a brief survey of the balance between major and other in-region forces before examining extra-regional powers. The chapter subsequently discusses additional considerations including potential new bases, the future use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and space-based assets. It concludes that the US must give greater focus to alliances and partnerships in terms of collaboration, basing, and access rights in the region.

This chapter will focus on the IOR, including nations that surround the Indian Ocean, but will omit discussion of air power within the Persian Gulf and its neighbouring region, which would be a full paper in itself. While the merits, strengths, and weaknesses of nations in the region can be debated, the focus of this chapter is on how the US currently plans to operate, manage, and partner with those aviation forces in the region; that is to say, if a conflict arises, how will American planners think about contingencies in the region.

US air power and the Indian Ocean

Unlike the North Atlantic or the North Pacific, the Indian Ocean as a whole is not dominated by any single power. There are a few islands in the Indian Ocean, but other than Diego Garcia none are strategically important in terms of air power. While there is a significant US military presence at Diego Garcia, which will be addressed later in

this volume, it is relatively small compared to the major facilities spread throughout the Pacific. Diego Garcia also poses a risk of being a single point of failure for the US in the Indian Ocean due to its compact nature and being within range of People's Liberation Army (PLA) missiles. Thus, what we see from the US is something akin to a policy previously referred to as 'places not bases,' by far the most important of which are in northern and western Australia, assuming a military alliance with India is not forthcoming[1]. And, while the US has access to a variety of facilities across the region, the Indian Ocean is largely a region to transit, rather than an area of basing, and is not typically envisioned as a primary theatre of war.

As is true of all oceans, the distances involved in crossing the Indian Ocean are significant, and thus require significant logistics and platforms that are capable of making the trek. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that access has always been difficult for third-parties transiting the area. Notably, India has not historically been hospitable to transits by US or other allied and partner aircraft. For air power, this means that only the below three capabilities can successfully operate in the IOR:

- large aircraft (e.g. air mobility, bombers, etc.) which are capable of transiting the area with internal fuel.
- aircraft that are capable of air-to-air refuelling, which of course also requires the refuelling aircraft.
- naval aviation, including carrier-based as well as land-based.

A potential future option is wide-spread use of unmanned systems.

So, when the US envisions air power in the Indian Ocean, these are the three 'bins' that planners think of in terms of capabilities of the US, its partners, and potential adversaries. This perspective emphasises the importance of distance, geography, and the current lack of basing for air power.

Complicating matters, particularly for the US and its allies, is the fact that responsibility, command, and control for the Indian Ocean is separated between three Combatant Commands – Africa Command (AFRICOM), Central Command (CENTCOM), and Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Thus, seams and cross-boundary coordination issues are present. While not unique to the Indian Ocean (all US Combatant Command boundaries divide oceans), the Indian Ocean is split three-ways, and is really the only ocean that holds the potential of facing competing interests for allotment of US military forces – between CENTCOM and INDOPACOM. This complexity is layered on top of the already present seams between the Department of Defense and the State Department, which use different boundaries for areas of responsibility in the region. Though not a debilitating situation, these seams do make coordination more of a challenge.

Major in-region forces

Apart from the US, as far as American military planners are concerned, Australia is the most capable major power in the IOR. As the only US ally in the region,[2] Australia has both an air force and a navy capable of operating in, transiting, and affecting operations in, much of the Indian Ocean. Australia and the US share a long history of combined operations across the full spectrum of military activities. Starting a decade ago with the US Marine Corps Rotational Force, and continuing through the announcement of the AUKUS agreement for both pillar one, i.e. nuclear-powered submarines, and pillar two, i.e. trilateral development of joint advanced military capabilities, this close partnership only continues to deepen and broaden. The two militaries, including the air and space forces, have officers assigned to organisations in the other. This is far beyond simply having attaches attachés or exchange officers, these officers are active and integral parts of the respective organisations, just as their own citizens are. Beyond the personnel, the two air forces share operational plans and exercises, continue to practice and execute interoperability missions, and have supporting supply, maintenance, and logistics systems. Throughout the IOR, there are no closer allies than Australia and the US, and across the spectrum of military operations, from peace to war and everything in between, the two continue to build on that relationship.

Next is India, with hundreds of combat aircraft, air-to-air refuelling capability, Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS) aircraft, transport, and a full suite of support aircraft. The Indian Air Force, backed by the Indian Navy with 40 fighters, patrol/anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft and helicopters, and plans to expand, is a significant force in the region. At present, the Indian military is designed for homeland defence, but as India expands its horizons, and as its GDP and defence budget grow, we should anticipate a larger Indian Air Force and growth in the Navy, including naval aviation.[3] In fact, India is actively working to modernize and upgrade its aviation forces. The Indian military is working with the US and France to meet its modern aviation needs. It has pursued Rafale aircraft for its Air Force and now the Navy, and is opting for US C-17, C-130, CH-47, AH-64, P-8I, and MH-60 aircraft, in addition to the announcement of a plan to buy 31 MQ-9Bs.[4] This trend looks to continue for the foreseeable future, with the Indian Air Force likely to acquire a sizeable imported air wing to replace its remaining MiG-21s and Jaguars.[5]

At the same time, India is trying to build its own defence industrial base, including in aerospace. This is an area where US planners, and industry, think they can build a closer relationship between India and the US. In fact, the two countries recently signed a Defense Industrial Cooperation Roadmap,[6] a part of which includes an agreement to build GE F414 engines in India, including a significant technology transfer. India

will use that engine in its Tejas MKII to replace all of its MiG-21s. If all goes well, one could forecast a potential future where Indian low-cost fighter aircraft replace Russian models around the rim of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, if India is successful in building up its industrial capacity, it could begin to figure more prominently in US logistics planning, potentially serving as an alternative location for repairs, refueling, and re-supply for operations in the Indian Ocean Area of Responsibility but that is in the future, and only one of many possibilities at this point.

In addition to this budding industrial relationship, India and the US continue to slowly grow the relationship between their air forces. The US flew F-35s to participate in Aero India[7] in February, 2023, and deployed B-1B bombers to participate in the COPE INDIA[8] exercise in April 2023, demonstrating the range of US aircraft, and the growing ties between air forces.

India's air power capabilities, however, quickly atrophy as operations move further from the subcontinent. While India's armed forces are modernising, they still appear to lack an expeditionary mindset or doctrine. India also currently lacks the logistics, command and control, and resources to project force much beyond its own borders. The Indian Air Force has been primarily focused on supporting the Indian Army. With the growing strategic focus on China, India's military doctrine and training will need to be developed, which takes time. Additionally, current discussions in India on potentially eliminating its third aircraft carrier are seen by some as evidence that India does not see itself as an expeditionary force yet.

While the Indian armed forces currently discuss desires to take on a bigger role in regional security, they have yet to do so. Australia, on the other hand, has actively participated in multiple long-range and long-term military missions, and consistently works closely with the US and allies and partners. Australia has proven the capability, the capacity, and the willingness to engage across the region and across the globe. India, for now, remains in the planning and building stage. This is not to diminish India's potential in any way. Quite to the contrary, partnerships and cooperation, through mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), show that Australia and India can and do work cooperatively and closely with one another, along with the US, Japan, and others.

Pakistan has a sizeable air force with hundreds of fighter aircraft supported by transport, limited air-to-air refuelling, AWACS, and electronic warfare aircraft. However, it has a much smaller naval aviation component, which is land-based, including about a dozen patrol aircraft, and another dozen ASW helicopters of two main varieties. As such, Pakistan is certainly capable of influencing combat operations in and around its territory, and exerting air power across the northern part of the Indian Ocean. However, Pakistan has limited ability to push that air power very far offshore. Its naval component could certainly influence other maritime forces'

use of combat air power through its patrol and surveillance platforms, but it seems unlikely that its ASW capability would be used against the US or China during any major crisis, and thus is likely limited to conflicts with India. It is also unlikely, despite Pakistan's close defence relationship with China, that it would provide combat support or combat basing privileges to either the US or China in a conflict involving these major powers. While China and Pakistan have a close and developing relationship, particularly in defence and military sales, strengthened through the US$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the build up at the port of Gwadar, Pakistan remains fiercely independent and is unlikely to allow permanent military basing by any outside nation.

Singapore has over 100 modern, fourth- and fifth-generation fighter aircraft, with tankers and AWACS to support long-duration and long-distance operations. And, while Singapore has a relatively small navy, it still maintains a small fleet of modern Sikorsky SH-60 Seahawk helicopters. The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) is considered to be the best in Southeast Asia and one of the premiere air forces in the region. The RSAF regularly trains and exercises with the US and other partners in the region. The RSAF has training and operational bases in four other countries, and partners with many others for out-of-area exercises on a regular basis. While Singapore's aviation forces in the Indian Ocean are currently relatively limited, they certainly maintain the capability, capacity, and willingness to operate far from Singapore, should the need arise. And should Singapore choose to do so, its military could be one of the most highly trained and proficient forces present.

The Indonesian Air Force has approximately 100 aircraft, mostly short-range fighters or light attack jets, and only one refuelling aircraft, a modified C-130. The Indonesian Air Force has suffered a number of accidents over the last decade,[9] but continues to operate its fleet of C-130s since it is the only aircraft in its inventory capable of reaching the Indonesian archipelago's distance extremities.[10] Indonesia has plans to grow its naval capabilities over the next decades, but its naval aviation forces are capable only of limited air surveillance, ASW, fast logistics support, maritime patrol, and marine combat operations.[11] Although Indonesia does regularly employ its naval aviation platforms during exercises like CARAT (with the US), SEA SURVEY, LINUD MALINDO (with Malaysia and Indonesia), PITCH BLACK (with Australia) and others, these are still limited in scale, and typically take place in Indonesia's littoral regions.[12]

Now and into the foreseeable future, these are the only regional players US planners consider can influence air power in the IOR. None of these nations have interests that are inimical to a free and open region, and all subscribe to the idea that the stability and prosperity built by the post-Second World War order and institutions is a good thing. So, while there are obviously persistent tensions between

India and Pakistan, the US considers these nations and their aviation capabilities as force enhancers, possible coalition partners, and providers of supply, logistics, and information necessary to improve safety and stability in the area during peacetime, and likely during conflict as well.

Other in-region forces

While the nations discussed above are seen as being capable of exerting air power influence across significant portions of the region, and likely partners for the US and its allies, other Indian Ocean states can assert a degree of local influence. Although some might be important partners for the US, these nations are unlikely or unable to impact modern air combat operations anywhere outside of their immediate national boundaries. In the context of air power, these players are seen more as locations that can provide logistical support to one side, or another, of a possible conflict. These include the following:

- Malaysia has approximately 40 combat aircraft in its inventory, but only four tankers, and a couple of dozen transport aircraft. Malaysian Army and naval aviation are limited to a dozen or so armed light helicopters and a handful of anti-submarine helicopters.
- while Thailand has approximately 100 attack/fighter aircraft, it has no air-to-air refuelling capability, and three dozen transport aircraft. The Royal Thai Navy is limited to a dozen or so ASW aircraft, fixed-wing and helicopters.[13] While the navy does own an aircraft carrier, it demobilised its entire fleet of aircraft, and its use has been limited to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions for nearly two decades. So while it remains a potential influencer of naval air power, that appears unlikely for the foreseeable future.
- Myanmar has approximately 80 combat aircraft, but no air-to-air refuelling capability, and about 30 transport aircraft. Myanmar has fewer than 10 naval patrol or surveillance aircraft, and a handful of air-capable naval vessels.
- Bangladesh has about 40 MiG aircraft (or Chinese variants, J-7s), no air-to-air refuelling capability, and a dozen or so transport aircraft. Bangladesh's navy operates a pair of ASW and a pair of patrol aircraft.
- Sri Lanka has a token air force with a handful of transport aircraft and a few dozen helicopters, four of which serve with its navy.[14]

France is an Indian Ocean country and a member of IONs,[15] and La Reunion and Mayotte are French Departments. France operates the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, which supported air operations in Afghanistan, and in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in the fight against ISIS, as well as other exercises and operations. France is currently working on plans for its next-generation aircraft carrier, which is

due to enter service in the middle of the next decade, in time to replace the *Charles De Gaulle*. France is also an Indo-Pacific power, with a million French nationals in the region and over 900,000 square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone to monitor. While it has had limited military interaction of late, even with the uptick in the last couple of years, France remains actively involved across the Indian and Pacific Oceans diplomatically. France has allowed the Indian Air Force's P8s to use the airfield at La Reunion, and its main partners in the area are the US, India, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Singapore. Singapore, in fact, hosts a squadron in France to train its fighter pilots. France takes an active role in counter piracy missions, and trains other regional air forces through its defence engagement framework. The French bases in Djibouti, La Reunion and Al Dhafra, in the UAE where there are six Rafale stationed, can be reached directly from France, and are used to perform routine power projection missions.

Other countries that border the Indian Ocean do not figure prominently, if at all, in US considerations of air power in the region. At this point, African states do not have a significant impact, and while these nations may provide limited options for basing or resupply, these are not currently robust enough to be first-choice locations. This includes South Africa, which, while a developed country, has a mostly helicopter-based air force, and fewer than two dozen Gripen C jets, which were first produced more than two decades ago. South Africa can certainly offer modern logistical support, but its location does not do much to address the vast distance challenge of the Indian Ocean.

The other location in and around Africa of possible significance is the effort to build up and improve facilities on Agalega Island in Mauritius, including a new 3,000-metre runway, and work on a port that could potentially support naval operations. While much work needs to be done, this location could provide India, and indeed potentially other militaries as well, another foothold in the Western Indian Ocean. In the future, if African Union forces, or United Nations forces, employ UAVs in a large-scale way for future operations in the Horn of Africa or East Africa, such a development could have an impact regionally. But this eventuality is not likely to happen in the near future.

For the foreseeable future, interests or flash points on the east coast of Africa are not likely to lead to large-scale conflict, much less one that would involve more than a single great power. As such, these nations and areas are unlikely to have a large-scale impact on air power in the Indian Ocean.

The one possible exception to this is Djibouti – not due to its own military forces, which are minimal, but due to its willingness to host other nations' militaries on its soil. The US, France, Italy, Japan, and China all have military bases in Djibouti. The US alone maintains a presence of several thousand personnel at Camp Lemonnier,[16]

designed largely to counter violent extremist organisations in East Africa "in order to promote regional stability and protect US interests while maintaining operational access".[17] The US conducts air operations out of nearby Chabelley Airfield, originally built by the French military, but likely could expand operations if necessary in a contingency; although it would be more likely to flow forces from its larger bases in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar, for example. Japan maintains C-130H KC-767 transport aircraft to support operations in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

Extra-regional powers

There are several other nations that have interests in, or the ability to exert power through the air in the IOR.[18] Because a significant portion of the relevant air power exerted by extra-regional forces is via aircraft carriers, it must be noted that one of the biggest weaknesses of aircraft carriers is not borne by enemy aircraft, but by submarine and ballistic missile threat. Currently, there is a relatively small ballistic missile threat in the Indian Ocean, as distinct to the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. Submarines, however, remain a threat everywhere and will hamper carrier operations in a kinetic conflict.

Britain has a global military, and shares the Diego Garcia base with the US. While absent from the region for a number of years, the British navy deployed its fixed-wing aircraft aboard the HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, including a detachment of US F-35s,[19] in 2021 as part of the combined UK-US *Carrier Strike Group 2021*. Britain maintains an air force capable of deploying to, and operating in, any area of the world; and its navy remains one of the most formidable in the world today. Britain clearly has the means, motivation, and the will to exert power in this region. Coupled with its long-term ongoing operations with the US military, its 'special relationship' with the US diplomatically, its combined efforts in the Five-Eyes intelligence sharing system, Britain is by far the extra-regional ally with whom the US has the closest and most interoperable relationship.

Russia has the *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft carrier, which saw active operations in Syria in 2016, and could be employed in the Indian Ocean should the need arise; but it appears likely to remain in port or under repair for the near future. Additionally, Russia maintains an air force capable of reaching the Indian Ocean and impacting operations throughout the region, either directly, or through actions on the periphery. Russia is also pursuing an agreement for a naval base in Port Sudan, which holds the potential of supporting operations at some point in the future.

Through their planned light aircraft carrier fleet, ASW aircraft, and very capable surface fleet, the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) has the capability and the capacity to impact air operations in and around the Indian Ocean. Japan can also support

operations with its fully modern air force through forward basing and air-to-air refuelling operations. While in the past, Japan has been cautious in deploying its forces outside of the immediate vicinity of Japanese territory, this seems to be slowly changing, with deployments to, and exercises in, the South China Sea. Japan deploys an Izumo-class carrier to the region every year, and has the ability to influence or conduct operations in the Indian Ocean more in the future, and likely more than many of the other out-of-area powers. Furthermore, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force maintains a presence of two P-3 patrol aircraft as part of a task force stationed in Djibouti. While maintaining a relatively small footprint in the IOR, the continued growth of the Quad may entice Japan to take a more active role in exercises and operations in the IOR. Japan certainly has the capability to influence events should it choose to. Additionally, Japan recently signed the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement which "aims to facilitate mutually beneficial defense cooperation by establishing a framework for the conduct of such cooperation between the two countries".[20] This comes as the JASDF deployed "four F-35As, supported by an aerial tanker, three transport aircraft and about 160 personnel"[21] in August of 2023 to take part in a long-range training exercise. Also in August 2023, Australia deployed several F-35As to Japan for the first time as part of the Bushido Guardian exercise. In December of 2023, Australia sent troops to participate in the Yama Sakura exercise, where American forces also participated.[22] All of that to show that the Japanese are taking a more active role securing a "free and open Indo-Pacific"[23] throughout the region, building partnerships, and integrating their training with other democracies.

Although South Korea, Spain, Italy, and others all have, or are building, aircraft carriers, none are likely to be involved in any foreseeable operations or conflicts in the Indian Ocean.

Which leaves of course, the PLA. The PLA has grown by leaps and bounds over the course of the last two decades and shows no signs of abating any time in the near future. With stated goals of completing its military modernisation within this decade, and becoming a world-class military by 2049, the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party has a plan to impact areas across the globe, not the least of which is the Indian Ocean. While chapter 3 (China's future military presence in the Indian Ocean) outlined China's future military presence in the region, currently China has the ambition, but not quite the capability to do so.

However, that gap is closing rapidly. As China expanded its military presence to purpose-built man-made features in the South China Sea, it is attempting to extend its reach far from Chinese territory. Both the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) are capable of refuelling at, and operating from these artificial features and this means China is now capable of exerting air power throughout the South China Sea, into the western Pacific, and

potentially into parts of the Indian Ocean. What is no longer in dispute is that the PLA could impact air operations to and from the region in a major conflict, from these features, should it choose to do so.

The PLAN operates the PLA Support Base in Djibouti, and has between 1,000 and 2,000 personnel, a small 400-metre airfield capable of supporting helicopter and UAV operations, and an improved port facility with a dock that can now reportedly support both of the PLA's aircraft carriers.[24] Obviously these facilities could provide air power support, though relatively limited at this point, to any operations in the Indian Ocean.

The PLAN is still in the building phase for its aircraft carrier program. While technically an operational carrier, which could be used in a limited contingency operation, the *Liaoning* is essentially a training carrier. However, the *Shandong*, and its follow-on carriers will afford the PLAN an expeditionary option that was previously lacking. These new carriers will be outfitted with 30 or more J-15 'Flying Shark' jets, along with Z-9 and Z-18 helicopters, and will constitute a legitimate naval aviation force capable of operating throughout the Indian Ocean and surrounding region. As of November 2024, the PLAN's third carrier, the *Fujian* undergoing sea trials and the PLAN's fourth carrier is currently under construction. Each aircraft carrier iteration builds on lessons learned from the earlier iterations and brings new capability and capacity that enable the PRC to exert military influence in the region.

What remains a deficiency for the PLA is the ability of the PLAAF to conduct long-range operations. While the H-6 bomber, and its multiple variants and configurations, is reported to have a combat radius of around 3,500 kilometres,[25] which would allow it to fly to the eastern edge of India and to the very northwest corner of Australia, the PLA continues to lack a robust air-to-air refuelling capacity. While the US has just over 500 tankers, the PLAAF only has about 30, most of them are imported Russian aircraft or converted bomber airframes. The PLA has plans to address this shortfall with its new Y-20 tanker, however many years will be needed to build up a fleet capable of supporting sustained long-range operations outside of the Chinese mainland. Not to mention the training requirement for pilots of both the tanker and the tanking aircraft.

Until the PLA is able to build a refuelling fleet, its ability to project air power, particularly PLAAF air power, into the Indian Ocean will be limited. To date, PLAAF long-distance deployments outside of China's mainland have been very limited. PLAAF airlift aircraft have been dispatched to deliver humanitarian assistance and other cargoes to locations in Africa, the Middle East and Europe and have also participated in airshows as far afield as Austria, the UAE, and South Africa. With the exception of the Bayi aerobatic team, the most significant long-range deployment of any PLAAF fighter aircraft was to Turkey, more than a decade ago. While there

is a possibility for the PLAN to utilise ports and facilities in the Indian Ocean, the PLAAF seems to not have made any in-roads in establishing the ability to do so. Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan all might be willing to permit PLAAF aircraft, on a short- or long-term basis, but there is no indication at this point that there are plans to do so, nor the training to support it.

Another issue the PLA faces is an organisational one. For decades, the PLA was a ground-oriented, army-centric, inward-facing force, primarily concerned with homeland defence. This perception shift has changed over the course of the last decade, and is a particular focus of the most current round of reforms, which started in earnest in 2016. While China has identified it as an issue, the PLA still lacks an overall command and control structure for out of area deployments. The PLA naval base in Djibouti is centrally controlled from the Central Military Commission in Beijing, and the newly established Theater Commands do not have authority beyond what Beijing considers China's geographic confines. So, while China certainly could make do with an ad-hoc arrangement in a time of crisis, and may over time develop the command and control infrastructure and doctrine to support overseas operations, as of now, this would be a major impediment to any exercise of PLA air power in the Indian Ocean. Structure will also likely prevent the PLA from exercising any real ability to surge air power into the region in the near future. China's leadership recognises this issue, and likely has plans to develop such mechanisms in the future, potentially in the coming decade, but as of yet this issue has not been addressed in any meaningful way.

An additional consideration related to the PLA is not its own ability to project air power into the Indian Ocean, but its capability to influence other nation's ability to use air power. Through its sustained focus on missile technology, China has developed one of the most diverse missile inventories in the world, and has the doctrine and the stated intent to make use of it. Through its placement of missiles, be they short-, medium- or intermediate-range ballistic missiles, across China, and potentially on its man-made features in the South China Sea (although there are no confirmed deployments of missiles to the South China Sea as of yet), the PLA hopes to be able to hold at risk other nation's air power generation ability. Coupled with its increasingly active navy, the PLA Rocket Force hopes to have the ability to threaten airbases as well as aircraft carriers, and potentially refuelling aircraft, with the ability to strike deep into the Indian Ocean. This is a current capability, which will likely only grow in the coming years.

Other considerations: bases, UAVs and space

With the totality of the foregoing forces in mind, there are several additional factors that US planners and policymakers take into consideration when thinking about air power in the Indian Ocean.

First, although this chapter does not specifically address forces and bases in and around the Persian Gulf, these factors can affect the Indian Ocean. The US operates from a number of air bases in the Middle East, all of which have seen continuous operations for more than two decades. Access to these bases and the support they offer has been a key component of post-9/11 operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and throughout the Middle East region. While not formal treaty allies, these host nations play a critical role in supporting coalition operations, and enable the US, its allies, and partners to continue to exert air power from the Middle East into and across the Indian Ocean. As a result, Middle East states, while not major actors in air power operations in the Indian Ocean, can certainly have a major impact on US and coalition forces' ability to do so, whether through interference and interdiction (from Iran for example), or through restrictions and caveats from host nations. Of note, however, currently INDOPACOM provides more support and air power to the Indian Ocean from Pacific bases, Japan, Guam, etc., than does CENTCOM. While this could change during a conflict, it is important to note that US air and naval assets from the Pacific can reach across the Indian Ocean.

As discussed in other chapters, Diego Garcia, while central, both physically and operationally, to air power operations in the Indian Ocean, is limited in size and ability to sustain major operations over long durations without serious effort in planning and prepositioning. Thus, the airbases in the Middle East remain an important consideration for US and allied forces for the foreseeable future.

A second important consideration is the advent of UAVs. The previous section, in outlining major military forces of relevant states, did not discuss how UAVs can and will affect the region in the coming decades. The reason for this is the list would be too expansive and is subject to swift technological change. UAVs of all shapes, sizes, and missions, are proliferating faster than modern military tactics, much less doctrine, can adapt. Small, versatile, and relatively cheap – though a Chinese *Wing Loong* can cost up to US$2 million, and a US *Reaper* drone can reach upwards of US$16 million, they are still a fraction of even a modest modern aircraft like a SU-27, which cost about US$40 million to start – UAVs are a new favourite of air forces large and small. While UAV efficacy and survivability has yet to be tested in a highly contested environment, they afford a variety of options that may not have otherwise been available. A full discussion of UAVs, capabilities, and impact is too lengthy to cover here, but suffice it to say, as the US considers air power across the Indian Ocean, UAVs will have an ever-growing impact, likely in ways and places that are yet to be considered, or even worse, have been discounted.

A third consideration, though not new in itself, is how space affects air power from and across the Indian Ocean. Once confined to major powers, access to space and space-based capabilities is opening to smaller countries at a fast pace. The price

to access space has plummeted. Payload costs, which were US$10,000–15,000 per kilogram as recently as 2000, have dropped to US$1,500–2,600 and are projected to fall further.[26] China, for example, has made huge inroads with launching African states' satellites into orbit (Sudan, Ethiopia, etc.). With the proliferation of commercial imagery and communications satellites, what was once the exclusive realm of intelligence agencies is now available to governments and consumers around the world. Coupled with the precise position, navigation, and timing afforded by multiple constellations (most recently exemplified by China's completion of its BeiDou constellation) assets of all types are now easily identified, monitored, and targeted. What this will mean for the next major conflict is a matter of speculation, but it will certainly affect the ability of militaries to gain and maintain access to, or control of, the air.

In addition to commercial sector space activities, China has been actively increasing its space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and military capabilities, reaching more than 30 successful launches in 2019, and surpassing 350 active satellites in orbit. These satellites allow China the ability to monitor and track ships and aircraft across large swaths of the planet, including the Indian Ocean, which would otherwise not be available to China due to a lack of long-range patrol and surveillance aircraft capable of operating away from China's mainland. The PLA has invested heavily in its ballistic missile forces, relying on it for long-range strike against land and maritime targets, but without accurate location data, those systems are marginalised. It is clear that the PLA plans to use space-based assets to support this capability.

From a US military planner's perspective, air power in the Indian Ocean can be thought of as a spectrum across three situations. First, during peacetime, the US seeks partnerships to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. This allows the US to assure partners across the region, to help train countries for their own homeland defence, and to be prepared for inevitable humanitarian and disaster relief efforts. Second, the US seeks to deter threats from malign actors wherever they may arise. And finally, should it ever come to it, to employ air power for sea control and maritime superiority in times of war where the Indian Ocean will be "interior lines of communication".

It is important to remember the context in which air power would be used. Currently, it is reasonable to posit that, outside of an India-Pakistan conflict, any other major conflict in the area would involve China, either directly or through proxies. And while this chapter has outlined nations in the region that could potentially factor into the use of air power in the area, many nations, even if they disagreed with China, would be unlikely to stand against it – Pakistan and Sri Lanka primary among them. Additionally, as a general assumption, due to historical issues, it is unlikely that India and Pakistan would participate in, much less cooperate during, any kinetic

conflict. This does not mean one side would necessarily oppose the other's actions or participation, but mutual integration into a larger construct would be problematic at best.

While it continues to build important partnerships and multilateral fora, like the Quad, the US still considers the Indian Ocean an economy of force region, where it will be able to swing and surge forces as necessary, but even with the 'Rebalance toward Asia' the IOR is still not likely to see a large increase in permanent basing of air power, including even naval air power. US planners feel confident that allies and partners can effectively serve as the frontline forces during times of peace, and the US would be able to reposition forces to the region in times of conflict. Of course, it is possible that in the future, the laydown of forces in the area may change. Should China establish a permanent air or naval base, should Pakistan or India adopt an anti-Western position, or should some other situation arise where the US lost confidence in its ability to project air power in the region from elsewhere, then of course it would reconsider its basing strategy. But for the near-term future, the US will focus on building up its allies and partners, and developing access points spread throughout the region.

Although the region is vast, there remain strategic choke points that will have an outsized effect on conflict in the region, e.g. the Strait of Malacca. China views the Strait as a strategic vulnerability, which has been one of the factors in its pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative, and its construction of artificial features in the South China Sea. The US continues to build its relationships with Singapore, Indonesia, and other key countries in the region to address stability, and ensure the freedom of access to these potential choke points. Much more can be written about the feasibility and impacts of restricting flows of shipping through the Strait, but that is largely a maritime issue.

It is important to remember that the current focus by the US military on 'All-Domain' is important for a reason. It is not feasible to separate out the air component from the naval component, from the land, space, cyber, or strategic components, as these are all intertwined. For the Indian Ocean, this means that air and maritime are critically linked. The US and its allies and partners hold the preponderance of the capability and capacity across the Indian Ocean to such a degree that there really is not even a close second. Not only are the numbers of patrol and surveillance aircraft significant, but they are well integrated through a series of bases in conjunction with US aircraft carries, in some cases using the same type of aircraft, e.g. a P-8. These assets allow US planners and partners to monitor, and if necessary, impact operations around the choke points into the Indian Ocean.

In any regional conflict, or for any larger conflict involving China, Russia, or others, maritime surveillance and strike will play a key role, and for the foreseeable

future, the advantage heavily lies with the democratic states operating in the region. In contrast, the PLAN lacks significant long-range maritime surveillance capabilities, and while China is exploring options that might expand access to the region in places like the South China Sea, Cambodia, Hambantota, or Gwadar, the PLA currently has few options for staging or operating in the region. The PLAAF has conducted precious few flights originating from or terminating at airfields outside of the immediate vicinity of China, and, like the PLAN, has few, if any, or no access to staging points in the region. The PLAAF today is really not set up for extensive operations or support in the Indian Ocean, especially due to lack of tanking options; however, with the expansion of bases on artificial features in the South China Sea, it is certainly a consideration for the Strait of Malacca.

Emerging technologies like hypersonics, cyber, unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, etc., continue to develop and will play a more important role in the future. It is uncertain if nations like China and Russia will reach farther into the Indian Ocean from the sanctuary of their own soil, and thus potentially impact the importance of air power in the region. It may also allow the US and its allies and partners to do the same in reverse. So, as with all new developments in warfare, the impact of these technologies is unclear at the moment, but they certainly will have an impact.

Implications for US allies and partners

The question for US policymakers is where to make investments now to ensure effective air power, both now and in the future. The answer may not be as simple as 'more and better planes'. While aircraft will certainly continue to play an important role in the exercise of air power in the future, there is one key area that the US should focus its attention and make investments: alliances and partnerships.

The US unipolar moment is over, the days of great powers dominating all domains across the globe are gone. Any significant challenges that the US will face in the future will require partners. This is true not just for nations accustomed to joining coalitions, but also for those used to leading them. Distances in the Indian Ocean are vast, and no nation or block of nations controls enough of the area to ensure access, nor to deny it to others.

Unless the US is willing to cause large-scale environmental damage like China by building artificial islands, no further real estate will be created in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, basing and access rights will be a key component of air power, particularly for air forces. For example, gaining access to Sir Lanka and the Maldives will strengthen US and allied ability to operate in the Indian Ocean. Although those countries are not force enhancers, such potential bases would be located strategically in the Indian Ocean. While navies have the luxury of making use of international

waters, air forces, and indeed large naval aircraft, require long runways from which to operate. While some missions currently accomplished by large aircraft might be accomplished by UAVs in the future, the US will surely still need access to runways and airfields to support a wide variety of missions.

The US will need is to find and secure options and access now for future possibilities, it will also need to ensure that future access options that are not considered, or are discarded, are not foreclosed to it in the future. It is possible that investments, treaties, agreements, etc. now, might prove beneficial in the future, even if only to keep that possibility open.

This means that like-minded states with common interests and values need to work together in the long term to perpetuate alliances and partnerships. Improvements to intelligence sharing with like-minded states across the region should be a key goal going forward. As the prior Chief of Staff of the US Air Force was fond of saying, "we need to get from NOFORN [information not for release to foreign nationals] to YESFORN".[27] However, this will require investments in information technology, and mindset changes. Currently, most nations in the region lack the infrastructure and procedures to properly protect classified information to the degree that the Five Eyes, US-Japan, US-Korea, etc., would require. This issue limits the effectiveness of the information that could be provided at this point. So far, these countries have been hesitant to make the necessary investment without a pressing requirement to do so.

The US should also be encouraging its partners to make the right investments in ways that support interoperability with US forces and with other allies and partners. It must encourage these nations not to make short-sighted investments in less expensive technology, from, for example Russia and China, but to find options that will allow reasonable budgets to procure systems that will integrate with future combined operations. In other words, the US should encourage well-informed capital procurements that align with needs.

As economic, demographic, and geopolitical weight continues to shift toward the Indo-Pacific, and as the very nature of, and access to, air power continues to change, the US needs to ensure that it is investing the right money, time, and effort, in the right places. No matter what future challenges arise, allies and partners will be the key to success, especially in the increasingly multipolar Indian Ocean Region.

Notes: chapter 5

1 India remains steadfastly wedded to its policy of strategic independence. While the interests of the United States and India continue to become more and more aligned, the prospect of a military alliance is far in the future, if ever.
2 Though a US treaty ally, for planning purposes, the US largely considers Thailand to be a Pacific nation, though a portion of the isthmus lays on the Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca.
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13 "World Air Forces 2021," Flight International, 2021, 31, accessed 2 November 2024. https://www.flightglobal.com/download?ac=75345
14 "World Air Forces 2021," 30.
15 Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a series of biennial meetings between the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region.
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17 "About the Command," Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa, 2021, https://www.hoa.africom.mil/
18 For the purposes of this chapter, France and Britain will be considered as extra-regional powers despite their territorial holdings in the Indian Ocean.

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6

An Indian perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean

M. MATHESWARAN

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is now an important centre of gravity for global maritime commerce and geopolitical competition. There is clearly a contest for power and influence in the Indian Ocean where the rapid expansion of China's aerospace and maritime power competes with those of India, the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the littoral countries of the IOR, and by extension, the entire Indo-Pacific.

India's geographical centrality in the Indian Ocean gives it a commanding presence and significant advantage for the application of naval and air power, and thus the potential to be a preeminent power in the IOR. Figuratively, India commands the Indian Ocean, which it considers as its rightful sphere of influence. The presence or intrusion by extra-regional powers is seen with suspicion. To India's increasing concern, China is making rapid inroads in influencing the countries of the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) economic and infrastructure strategy, via which it will gain access to a chain of overseas ports and airfields. Recent Sino-Indian border clashes have led to a state of deep distrust between the two Asian giants. Such distrust is a manifestation of the larger geopolitical contest between India and China on one hand, and China and the US on the other for supremacy in the IOR.

This chapter examines India's military strategy and its aerospace capabilities in the context of China's growing capabilities for projecting air power in the IOR. India's boundary and territorial disputes with Pakistan and China have led to a strong continental and defensive approach to its security at the cost of its maritime

advantage. On the other hand, China is using its rapid economic growth and military modernisation to increase its presence in the IOR and eventually dominate it. The chapter looks at China's growing air power capabilities in the region and India's advantages derived from its geography. It argues that these advantages are ephemeral in the context of China's rapidly expanding power projection capabilities.

India's strategic orientation: overcoming the continental and defensive mindset

India's defence policy is characterised by its defensive and reactive approach in dealing with threats and crises. A war with Pakistan within a few months of independence, and the military debacle against China a decade later, ensured India's land-centric focus to the west and the north across the Himalayas. George Tanham links India's continental approach to security as a legacy of the British, and the wars and disputes with Pakistan and China since independence. The British developed a land-oriented defence strategy for the country, which was executed entirely by the British Indian Army, while the Royal Navy's dominance of the Indian Ocean protected India from seaborne attack.[1]

The vast territorial boundaries to be safeguarded, combating insurgency and terrorism, the long and continuing involvement in low-intensity conflict with Pakistan, and border disputes with China, gave prominence to ground forces. It established the Indian Army's complete domination of the military's strategic thought process and effectively India's defence policy, influencing force structure, budgets, procurement, strategy, and modernisation. The large size of the Indian Army, 1.14 million strong, takes a disproportionately large share of the budgeted resources.

While the Army takes 63 per cent of allocated resources, the Navy and the Air Force received only 13 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively, of the budgetary resources in 2020-2021.[2] The remaining budget is allocated to research and development, and defence industry. This high budget allocation to the Army also manifests in a defensive approach. Yogesh Joshi and Anit Mukherjee explain India's defensive strategy as a status quo approach whereby India does not intend to recover lost territories, but rather maintain the status quo by denying China any easy victory along the frontier. The Indian Army has always viewed air power primarily in a supporting role for the Army.[3] This approach was accentuated by the Indian government's reluctance to use air power, fearing its escalatory potential. That barrier was somewhat overcome in the Kargil War with Pakistan in 1999.[4]

India has generally avoided offensive use of air power during peacetime, a reflection of inadequate exploitation of the strengths of air power. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru refrained from using the Indian Air Force's (IAF) strong offensive air power against the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the 1962 war with

China, based on faulty advice from the US Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith. Paradoxically, Nehru appealed to US President John F Kennedy for offensive air support towards the end of the war. India has rarely used offensive air power to deter and enforce peace on the Line of Control (LOC) against Pakistan, or on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) against China. India's air strike on Balakot in Pakistan in February 2019 was the first time the IAF crossed international borders for an offensive strike since the 1971 war. It remains to be seen if this is a major departure in India's military strategy or a one-time demonstration.[5]

Arzan Tarapore observes that "army-centric orthodox offensive doctrine tended to render the military as a less useful tool of national strategic policy".[6] The Indian Army's involvement in multiple areas – from aid to civil authorities, fighting insurgency and terrorism, in addition to dealing with China and Pakistan across the LAC and the LOC – enables it to have a strong influence on the political leadership and the bureaucracy. It works against India's strategic interests as the army's large size and its nature of being the best resourced service helps to sustain its stubborn orthodox offensive doctrine as against the real need for a dominant aerospace and maritime strategy.

There was, however, a change in the late-1980s when India readily employed the military in its neighbourhood, notably against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam insurgents in Sri Lanka and in restoring the Maldivian government following a coup. By the mid-1990s, there was better appreciation of the need for incorporating a strong maritime approach to India's security. The IAF's transition to a strategic force contributed, in no small measure, to this change.[7]

The IOR and India's strategic imperatives

The Indian Ocean is seen as critically important to India for its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) as it is for China. To a large extent, India and China's respective economic rises and rapid growth are dependent on seaborne trade and imported energy, much of which traverses the Indian Ocean. China's 'Malacca Dilemma'[8] amplifies its strategic vulnerability with regard to SLOCs in the IOR. India is a 'key player' in the IOR by virtue of its geography and it being the regional power.

China's trade and geopolitical relations with South Asian and IOR littoral countries continues to grow at the expense of India's influence in what India considers an unacceptable intrusion in its neighbourhood. It has been argued that India has a proprietary attitude towards the IOR in its unofficial assertion that the military presence of outside powers in India's neighbourhood is essentially illegitimate and that neighbouring countries have a responsibility to prevent it.[9] Since 2008, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has maintained a constant presence of six to eight ships at any given time in the northern Indian Ocean and its submarines

have increased their forays.[10] China's plans for a blue water navy and global maritime power are well on track with its massive ship and submarine building programs.[11] The rapid growth of the PLAN is a concern for IOR littoral states and global powers.

China's strategy for securing its interests in the IOR is nuanced, with a long-term perspective. It combines aggressive economic and diplomatic policies along with its strategy of developing global power projection capabilities. The BRI is its manifestation as a comprehensive economic and political strategy, which is "both a blueprint and a testbed for establishing a Sinocentric world order".[12] China, through its 'maritime silk road initiative', pursues an ambitious program of expanding and upgrading ports and maritime-related infrastructure in the IOR countries. A string of port and airfield developments are under way. China's first overseas military base at Doraleh, Djibouti, opened in August 2017, and includes a tarmac and eight hangars for helicopter and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operations. Gwadar deep-sea port is a major port completed in Pakistan and is linked as the Indian Ocean terminal of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. The port is now managed under lease for 40 years by the China Overseas Ports Holding Company, a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE). Gwadar international airport, which will be the second biggest airport in Pakistan, is also under construction by the Chinese firm.[13] In addition, construction of a naval port and an airbase is under way at Jiwani, which is 80 kilometres further towards the Iranian border from Gwadar. The Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is now on a 99-year lease to the Chinese SOE China Merchants Port Holding Company. As Hambantota is a "strategic strong point" from a dual-use perspective, and considering the strong Sino-Sri Lankan relationship, the PLA's ability to access the port is a distinct possibility, certainly under the guise of People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) expeditionary capabilities for Humanitarian and Disaster Response (HADR) missions. The potential value of Hambantota port to China has been reduced by the handover of operational control over the nearby Hambantota airport to Indo-Russian commercial joint venture. This would likely impede any attempt by China to militarise the port. Kyaukpyu in Myanmar is another vital port, and as part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor project it provides strategic access to the PLA for its reach to the Bay of Bengal. Commercial ports and airfields such as those at Gwadar, Hambantota, and Kyaukpyu built by and managed by Chinese SOEs are on long leases and have dual-use potential. Such facilities are strategic strong points for potential military access and basing.[14] For China, the success of its BRI projects is vital to its global strategy and hence, its security and the imperative to project power in the IOR. Power projection capabilities require blue water naval forces, overseas bases, and long-range airlift and expeditionary forces.

India's imperatives in IOR lie in ensuring not only its maritime security through a strong naval and aerospace presence in the Indian Ocean, but also the need to overcome the challenges to its position of influence and predominance as a net security enabler in the IOR. In terms of air power, India has the potential to project power selectively despite the current low in its air and naval force structures. Currently, India's combat support assets, such as aerial refuellers, Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), etc, are too few and have become severe constraints in its ability to project offensive air power into the broader IOR. It may be time India thought about raising one or two squadrons of modern strategic bomber aircraft.

Exercises contribute to strengthening partnerships and confidence with regional countries. Though late, the IAF has begun engaging regional air forces in bilateral and multilateral exercises. Exercises are now conducted with air forces of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Israel, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, South Africa, and South Korea, in addition to more frequent exercises with countries like Singapore, Australia, Japan and the major powers.

While Pakistan and China are the main adversaries, Pakistan's limited air power capability over the seas is less of a challenge to the IAF. In contrast with comments in chapter 5 (A US perspective on air power in the Indian Ocean), this author believes that given the strong strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, and the impact the CPEC will have on Pakistan's economic and strategic development, the chances of the PLAN and PLAAF operating from Gwadar and Karachi is a distinct possibility in the future. Evidence of this is the month-long joint exercise, SHAHEEN IX, carried out by the PLAAF and Pakistan Air Force in December 2020, with the PLAAF operating from Karachi air base as well.[15] With CPEC as the BRI's flagship project, the security and geopolitical stakes are high for both Pakistan and China.

The India-US strategic partnership has been strengthening in recent years. The conclusion of three foundational agreements, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, is a significant development in facilitating the sharing of intelligence and target information, surveillance coordination, interoperability, and the use of mutual naval bases and airfields for logistics support and operations. Similar logistics agreements have been signed with France, Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. These agreements enable synergy in enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA) and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. While China has superior space-based ISR, India's own resources, when combined with the those of its partners, may prove to be better.

China's airpower reach in the Indian Ocean: smart power and embedded coercion?

China's strategy for power projection in the IOR has obvious elements of Joseph Nye's smart power strategy along with strong coercive elements embedded.[16] China, as the rising power seeks to secure its interests by developing and fielding its capabilities in a manner that would force the retreat of the US' dominant influence from China's immediate regions in the east, and subsequently from the IOR.

This includes the effective employment of air power for deterrence and influence through power projection. China's air power imperatives in the IOR involve developing aerospace capability that is focused on deterrence to safeguard its interests and critical SLOCs. In contrast, in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and western Pacific, it pursues a more proactive offense-defence strategy.

The PLAAF's operational doctrines support the objective of complete control of the South and East China Seas up to the First Island Chain, while it simultaneously seeks to project power and aid sea control in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. These involve air and space capabilities for a long-range precision strike, comprehensive MDA and targeting, and air dominance to enable successful strategic missions.

The Science of Military Strategy articulates the PLAAF's strategic aims in China's territorial airspace as the absolute control area, the First Island Chain as a limited-control and security cooperation area, Second Island Chain as a long-range monitoring and flexible reaction area, which includes power projection into the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. Thus, it covers all of China's land territory and the skies above sea zones correlated to strategic interests.[17] Given the maritime territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, the Taiwan dispute, and the high prospects of dealing with US air and naval power, the majority of PLAAF and PLAN forces are necessarily deployed in the East toward the western Pacific.

The PLAAF's strength of 4th, 4.5, and 5th generation fighter aircraft is rising steadily and currently these number nearly 900 aircraft, inclusive of J-10, J-11, J-16, Su30MKK, Su-35, and the 5th generation aircraft J-20 A.[18] Aircraft such as the Su-30 MKK, Su-35, J-20, and J-16, armed with long-range air-to-surface missiles (ASM) and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCM), with aerial refuelling and AWACS cover, will provide the PLAAF with the capability to project strike power into the Bay of Bengal and Malacca Strait. However, the PLAAF will be constrained by the limited numbers of its aerial refuelling and AWACS assets.

Additionally, in order to reach the Malacca Strait or the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, PLAAF aircraft would need to fly across airspaces of countries including Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar. This would be a serious

violation of sovereignty of those nations, an unlikely prospect, at least in peacetime. Previously, China has long shown sensitivity towards small countries in sovereignty issues, although it may also co-opt smaller states when required. This overflight issue may impose constraints on PLAAF operations wherein it will need to fly the sea route that could become operationally tenuous. More importantly, the PLAAF's primary focus, however, is in the South and East China Seas and in the Himalayas against India.

The PLAAF's sizable bomber force of 100 H-6K and four H-6N[19] (nuclear capable) aircraft provide added long-range strike capability with ALCMs and ASMs. The PLAAF expects to field the new stealth bomber H-20 (similar to the American B-2) with supersonic and hypersonic missiles by 2025.

This situation may change considerably by 2035 if the PLAAF and PLAN are able to secure access to overseas airfields and ports through the success of its BRI projects. Access to basing facilities in Cambodia would enable the PLAAF to contest US and Indian air dominance over the Malacca Strait and eastern Indian Ocean. Similarly, access to Pakistan's ports and airfields at Gwadar and Karachi would enable the PLA's power projection into the western Indian Ocean. Access to similar resources in Sri Lanka, Myanmar or Bangladesh could significantly transform the aerospace environment over the eastern Indian Ocean.

Currently, the PLAAF's expeditionary capability into the IOR is very limited, if not non-existent. With the induction of its new heavy airlift aircraft Y-20, the PLAAF is now on track to build its strategic airlift capability. Current numbers are still small at 42, inclusive of 20 Y-20s and 22 older Russian IL-76 aircraft.[20] The Y-20 is likely to become the standard platform for airlift, flight refueller aircraft, AWACS, and airborne command posts. With its plans to build between 300 and 400 of these models by 2035, the PLA would achieve expeditionary capability not only in the IOR, but also on a global scale.

One of Chinese President Xi Jinping's most important military reforms is the creation of the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), which coordinates combat support assets such as aerial refuellers, AWACS, UAVs, plus electronic warfare, command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, space, and cyber platforms. The PLASSF is instrumental in developing target information and maritime domain awareness for PLAAF and PLAN operations. While airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets are limited, the PLA's satellite assets are significantly superior to all countries present in the IOR, other than the US. The PLASSF operates nearly 120 satellites that provide ISR, electronic intelligence, signals intelligence, and communications intelligence covering the entire globe on a continuous timeline. On April 19, 2024, the CMC announced the end of the PLASSF. It is now seen that the

PLASSF, which was the fifth service, was essentially a transitional structure to evolve an integrated and stable working process with aerospace, cyber, and information domains. As part of Xi Jinping's continuing reforms, the PLASSF is now replaced by three independent support branches – PLA Aerospace Force, PLA Cyber Force, and PLA Information Force. The three, along with the Joint Logistics Force, come directly under the control of the CMC.[21]

The ballistic and cruise missile strategy of the PLA Rocket Forces (PLARF) is well evolved and sophisticated. For long it has advocated the use of ballistic and cruise missiles with conventional warheads as the first line of attack in any conflict. Known as an anti-access, area-denial (A2AD) strategy, it deploys anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) and cruise missiles against large ships and aircraft carriers in the Pacific. A similar approach is likely in a limited manner from bases in southern China against Indian and US assets in the Bay of Bengal and northern Indian Ocean. A mix of land-attack and anti-ship variant ASBMs – DF-21, DF-26, and CJ-10 ground-launched cruise missiles and DF-21D with manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles gives the PLA the capability to conduct long-range (1,500 kilometre to 4,000 kilometre) precision strikes against ships and aircraft carriers. The PLARF has continued to increase its inventory of DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, which gives it the capability of conducting precision strikes in the western Pacific, the northern Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea from mainland China.[22]

China's aircraft carriers are still a force in development and it will be some years before the PLAN will be able to operate a full-fledged Carrier Task Group. Currently PLAN's two carriers, which are ski-jump carriers, will remain more as symbols of Chinese power in the South China Sea. China's true power projection with Carrier Task Groups into the IOR is less likely prior to 2035. China's third aircraft carrier, the flat-top 80,000-ton Fujian, with CATOBAR and electro-magnetic catapult assisted take-off systems commenced its sea-trials in May 2024. Similarly, China demonstrated its second fifth-generation fighter aircraft, J-35A, at the Zhuhai air show in November 2024. The airshow showcased China's significant aircraft development programs such as J-15T and J-15D, which are capable of operating from China's aircraft carriers. These developments indicate the rapidity of the development of China's airpower capabilities, both land and sea-based.[23]

China's air power deployments may surprise analysts if one views it from a conventional prism. What China has done so far is to create enough openings for its future strategic engagements and manoeuvring. Whether China would choose to apply force depends on how competitive issues develop. Given China's focus on long-term strategy, it is well-placed in deterring, compelling, and persuading those which are likely to obstruct China's progress. This is classic Sun Tzu win without fighting.[24] Thus, China's A2AD strategy that employs long-range anti-ship ballistic missiles is an

asymmetric strategy to push back and deter the US in the South China Sea or First Island Chain, which is more like win without fighting.[25] Its 'Three Warfares' strategy; media, legal, and psychological; is very much in tune with Sun Tzu.[26]

Indian air power and maritime strategy

Long constrained by land-centric tactical operations, the IAF's transformation into a strategic air force began in the late 1990s. The 2018-2019 annual report of India's Ministry of Defence highlights the IAF's pursuance of focused modernisation into a strategic aerospace power with full-spectrum capability.[27]

Nearly 80 per cent of the IAF's assets, deployments, and bases continue to be focused on Pakistan and China. For the IAF, the IOR began to gain importance with the establishment of the IAF Southern Air Command (SAC) in 1985, with its headquarters at Trivandrum, in the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula, and the growing prominence of HQ Maritime Air Operations for coordinating the IAF's offensive air operations with the Indian Navy. SAC has the largest area of responsibility among the IAF's geographical operational commands, covering the northern Indian Ocean and the island territories. It continues to be so despite the establishment of the joint Andaman Nicobar Command in 2001, with its area of responsibility covering the exclusive economic zone around the Andaman Nicobar Islands and the security of SLOCs in the eastern Indian Ocean.

The Indian Navy has substantial MDA capability, with its fleet of 12 Poseidon P-8I long-range maritime reconnaissance (LRMR) and anti-submarine warfare aircraft. Armed with Harpoon Block II anti-shipping missiles, Mk 54 lightweight torpedoes and depth charges, the P-8I poses a considerable challenge to China's naval operations in the IOR. With an operational range of 1,200 nautical miles and four- to five-hours' loiter time over target areas, the P-8I is a potent anti-submarine and anti-ship platform. Six more P-8I will join India's fleet by 2025. The Navy has planned for a strength of 26 LRMR aircraft by 2030, sufficient to monitor the entire northern IOR. An integrated approach to maritime surveillance in the broader Indian Ocean through coordinated operations is already under discussion using P-8s of India, the US, and Australia, along with France's resources. By potentially staging operations through France's Reunion Island, America's Diego Garcia, India's Andaman and Nicobar Command, and Australia's Cocos Islands, shared and co-ordinated maritime air surveillance of the IOR can be comprehensive. India's future air and naval facility in Mauritius' North Agalega island and India's agreement with Japan to use its base facilities in Djibouti will enhance joint MDA further.

In addition, cooperation with partner countries in pooling space-based ISR would enhance MDA and targeting capabilities comprehensively and in real-time. India and France have agreed to launch and operate jointly a constellation of eight to 10

satellites in low-earth orbits to enhance maritime surveillance in the Indo-Pacific.[28] A similar cooperative arrangement among the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners will be immensely effective and reflect optimal pooling of resources among partner countries for a common purpose.

The Indian Navy's aircraft carriers will form the crux of India's ability to project air power deep into the broader Indian Ocean. Given the home base proximity for the Indian Navy in the IOR, its two aircraft carriers will add a punch to its effectiveness. The PLAN, on the other hand, will be constrained in terms of experience with aircraft carrier operations as well as by the long supply chain for operations in the IOR for the foreseeable future.

As early as 2003, the Indian Navy had projected its plans for a three-carrier navy by 2020. Plagued with delays, the Navy currently operates the 44,500 ton INS *Vikramaditya,* and the indigenously built 40,000 ton INS *Vikrant* is now also fully operational after extensive sea trials. In June 2023, the Indian Navy demonstrated multi-carrier operations with coordinated deployment of INS *Vikrant* and INS *Vikramaditya* and more than 35 aircraft in the Arabian Sea.[29] Both carriers operate 36 aircraft (26 MiG-29K and 10 helicopters) and a host of ship-based missiles, weapons, and close-in weapon systems for self-protection. A third carrier is an absolute necessity, as the Chief of the Naval Staff has re-emphasised in December 2020, notwithstanding the contrarian view of the late Gen. Bipin Rawat, the former Chief of Defence Staff.[30] The real reason for the indecision is one of funding, a problem self-made by the Indian government. The government, however, is supporting the development of the Twin-Engine Deck-Based Fighter, based on the LCA (Light Combat Aircraft) expertise, which would be in the Rafale class of 23-ton 4.5 generation fighter, with the original target timeframe of 2026 for the first flight, already delayed and is unlikely before 2030. In the meantime, negotiations are under way for the procurement of 26 Rafale-M fighters for the aircraft carrier INS *Vikrant.*[31] A three-carrier Indian Navy's air arm, supported by its P-8I LRMR fleet and the IAF's shore-based fighter aircraft and combat support aircraft such as aerial refuellers and AWACS, will be a significant power presence in the IOR. Refuelling arrangements with international partners, such as the air-to-air refuelling deal signed with Australia in November 2024, could also help mitigate India's limited capabilities.

For a long time, maritime air operations were limited to air surveillance and reconnaissance by the Indian Navy with limited support from the IAF's Canberras. From the mid-1980s, when the IAF formed its first dedicated Jaguar Maritime Strike squadron with anti-ship missiles, the IAF's HQ Maritime Air Operations (MAO) and the Indian Navy began to fine-tune maritime strike operations. This coincided with the induction of the TU-142 LRMR. Over the next two decades, joint exercises involving the IAF and the Indian Navy were frequent, with regular operations from

the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) and with the western and eastern fleets. HQ Maritime Air Operations' role and span has expanded, with the IAF allocating more squadrons to a maritime strike role. With the enhancement of the MDA, operationalisation of the P-8I, AWACS, tankers, and new aircraft and weapons inductions, the role of HQ Maritime Air Operations in refining the doctrines has been significant. The operational data link enabling airborne network-centric warfare is having a transformational impact as it is getting fully operationalised.

Recognising the importance of maritime surveillance to the Indian Navy, the IAF transferred this responsibility to the Navy in 1976. The IAF, however, retained the shore-based maritime strike role, which has been fine-tuned as capabilities enhanced. The IAF, in coordination with the Navy, employs maritime strike in two segments: first in anti-shipping strike (i.e. enemy naval assets in the vicinity of Indian naval forces), and the second in maritime strike on an adversary's maritime assets both on land and the sea (i.e. enemy assets that pose indirect or long-term threats like surveillance aircraft, harbours etc). With the IAF handling the maritime strike operations, the Navy's carrier-based air power is better placed to meet its tasks with the carrier operating in deeper waters. However, this division is not set in stone. In order to exploit limited resources, considerable flexibility is necessary in the use of assets, and also where possible, in swing roles. The expansion of India's intelligence and maritime surveillance capabilities could also expand these roles. Given India's geography, anti-shipping strikes could extend deep into the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, and could also reach into Pakistan's shoreline.

The IAF is also enhancing its capability for IOR operations with new airbases in the peninsula. Thanjavur and Sulur in Tamil Nadu are operational, while there are plans for developing current forward bases at Thiruvananthapuram and Kannur in Kerala, Agati in Lakshadweep, and Rajahmundry in Andhra. These are in addition to airbases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The IAF is modernising various platforms for maritime strike capabilities. This has allowed the IAF to have much more flexibility in resource use as compared to the earlier limitation of just one dedicated maritime Jaguar strike squadron along with one Su-30 multi-role squadron. The IAF is now upgrading 60 Jaguar aircraft as part of its DARIN-III upgrade, which will have the Elta-2052 active electronically scanned array radar integrated with anti-shipping weapons. Similarly, more Su-30s are being modified to carry Brahmos supersonic anti-shipping missiles. Effectively, this development enables the IAF significant flexibility to swing-allocate resources as the situation demands.

Thanjavur, on the southern Indian peninsula, is now a major airbase for Su-30 MKI aircraft. Armed with 400-kilometre range supersonic ASM Brahmos, the Su-30 MKI is a major deterrent to adversaries' naval ships (such as those of Pakistan and

China) in the Indian Ocean.[32] The Su-30 also carries the 285-kilometre range Russian Kh-59MK ASM and the supersonic kh-31A ASM. Without aerial refuelling, a Su-30 can operate in a radius of action of 800–1,000 kilometres, and with aerial refuelling this can extend to 1,500–2,000 kilometres. However, the IAF's very limited number of refueller aircraft is a serious constraint.

The ANC, India's first theatre and tri-service command, is strategically located and commands the Bay of Bengal area and the six-degree and the 10-degree channels.[33] The IAF's upgraded Jaguar, armed with the 124-kilometre range Harpoon Block II ASM, and the Su-30 operating from Car Nicobar and from the naval airfield (planned to be upgraded by 2025) at Campbell Bay, can accentuate China's 'Malacca Dilemma'. The IAF's maritime strike Jaguars were deployed in Car Nicobar air base in the Nicobar Islands during the tense situation that prevailed in the Himalayas during 2020, with the probable intention of sending signals to China.[34]

With the ANC air defence system plugged into the mainland's fully networked integrated air command and control system, the ANC will dominate the skies over the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal with significant offensive strike capability. Military communications in the ANC received a boost with the inauguration of the new high-speed under-sea optical fibre cable connection from Chennai to Port Blair (Andaman).[35]

In the unlikely situation of a conflict with China in the IOR, India has the home base advantage and will have local balance of forces in its favour. The PLAAF's reach is limited to its bombers and missile forces, whereas the IAF and the Indian Navy can establish air dominance. China's ability to support large naval forces in the IOR is limited due to the absence of bases, and the vulnerability of its long supply chain to interdiction by the Indian Navy and the IAF. As previously noted, the PLAAF and PLAN may be able to access Pakistan's base facilities at Karachi and Gwadar. However, in a conflict these will come under threat from the IAF and the Indian Navy, and with the certainty of blockade, PLAN ships will, more likely, withdraw to the PLA base at Djibouti.

Despite the efficient utilisation of the limited resources by the IAF and the Indian Navy, India's slow pace of modernisation is a major concern. The rapid build-up and modernisation of the PLAAF and PLAN is certain to pose an increased threat in the IOR by 2030-2035. India could address this by taking a page out of China's A2AD playbook. India's Agni series ballistic missiles could be adapted for high-precision anti-ship roles and deployed both in the mainland and the ANC. The importance of long-range missiles seems to have been grasped by decision makers as recent developments show. On the 16th of November 2024 India demonstrated a successful test of its hypersonic long-range (over 1500 km), high-precision missile in to the Bay of Bengal/Indian Ocean. This is a signal that India may soon be capable of achieving

long-range anti-ship attack capability.[36] Long-range missiles can be augmented by air-, ground-, ship-, and submarine-launched cruise missiles. A proposal for adapting the PLA Rocket Forces model has been in consideration with the Indian Government since 2011.[37]

Air expeditionary capability

India has used air power in the past to influence events in the IOR both in coercive application of airpower and in HADR missions inclusive of non-combatant evacuation operations. In 1987, four AN-32s escorted by four Mirage 2000s carried out an aerial food supply drop to the besieged Jaffna population in northern Sri Lanka to the consternation of a stunned Sri Lankan government. It was a successful application of coercive air power to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, Indian air power (IAF and civil aviation) carried out one of the largest evacuations of civilians (170,000 Indian expatriates) from the Middle East between 13 August–20 October 1990.

Between 2000 and 2010, Indian air power was involved in 43 HADR, non-combatant evacuation operations and UN assistance operations across Asia and Africa. The IAF's strategic airlift capability is a compact and capable force of 11 C-17 A Globemaster III aircraft, 17 Ilyushin IL-76 aircraft, and 10 C-130 J Hercules special forces aircraft, supported by a large fleet of tactical airlift aircraft inclusive of heavy and medium-lift helicopters. This force is reasonably adequate to support expeditionary and out of area contingencies that India may be called upon to address within the IOR. Since 2011, India has begun to cater for out-of-area contingencies in the IOR that may consist of HADR operations, civilian evacuations, humanitarian interventions, and at the request for assistance from a friendly government.

Air expeditionary capability when used in HADR missions is useful in projecting a positive image. China is devoting considerable efforts to project itself as a responsible stakeholder in providing global public goods through active participation in HADR and UN missions. However, China has been accused of allowing political considerations to influence its HADR participation and prevent better international coordination of urgent relief efforts. A US government report cites China's lesser cooperation during the Nepal earthquake of 2015, and the slow and minimal assistance to the Philippines, which had territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, in the aftermath of the devastating Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.[38]

Air power and the freedom of action in the IOR

As China's air power reach improves in the Indian Ocean, it will seek to constrain India's freedom of action. India's primary advantage vis-a-vis the PLA, as John Garver observes, is the "tyranny of distance hobbling China's capabilities in the IOR, but

that tyranny of distance is gradually being diminished if not yet overcome, by the assertion of China's military control in the South China Sea (SCS)".[39]

China's access to a naval base and airfield in Cambodia will enhance its control in the South China Sea and influence in the Malacca Strait. China's control of a 175 square mile coastal property in Cambodia on a 99-year lease is of strategic significance. It is building a large commercial airport with a 3,400 metre runway at Dara Sakor, which can handle the PLAAF's heaviest and largest aircraft.[40] Dara Sakor airport and the nearby Koh Kong port, both managed by Chinese SOEs, are of major strategic significance for air dominance contest in the region.

As China increases its presence in the IOR with its enhanced air, naval, cyber, and space capabilities, its behaviour may begin to impact the operational freedom of others in the IOR. The US' influence and dominance in the IOR may decline as much of the region integrates with China's economy. The BRI is an important part of that strategy. Hence, as the BRI develops, China will need its power projection to grow along with it. Aerospace power is critical for the realisation of this objective. Aerospace power is equally critical for the US, India and other nations to keep the IOR open and free for navigation for all countries and ensure that the rule of law is maintained.[41]

The future of air power in the IOR: multilateral partnerships

The primary challenge to peace and stability in the IOR is the rise of China and its associated economic and geopolitical competition, compounded against the prospect of transitioning to a Sino-centric system. Military power, largely aerospace and naval power, as it works in the background, can sustain an uneasy peace through deterrence and the maintenance of a favourable balance of power. But how should India act from an air power perspective?

If India is to remain a key player in the IOR, it needs to address the shortfalls in its current air power capability. India has the advantage of geography, which allows it to dominate the northern IOR with force levels that can be far smaller than the PLA. But this advantage will dissipate as the PLAAF, and the PLAN complete expansions and modernisations by 2035. As discussed in chapter 7 (New strategic imperatives for air and space power in the Indian Ocean region: an Australian perspective), air power is most effective in multi-domain and joint force operations. India must address the following key issues:

- India's IAF fighter force levels are low, at 30 squadrons as against the 42 squadrons sanctioned by the government.[42] It needs to accelerate its acquisition process and manufacturing capabilities to achieve its full strength by 2030.

- if India is to be seen as a credible Indian Ocean power, its ability to project power is vital, which implies India needs to have a minimum of three aircraft carriers. Hence, constructing the third aircraft carrier is a vital decision. Simultaneously, India needs to accelerate the procurement and development of naval fighter aircraft, such as the Twin-Engine Deck-Based Fighter.
- India's planned enhancement of operational infrastructure at the Andaman Nicobar Command should be accelerated, inclusive of air defence infrastructure and offensive missile capabilities.
- India should expand its ballistic and cruise missile options for conventional deterrence. These are currently limited to Nirbhay cruise missile (800–1,000 kilometre range), and the Brahmos. Effectively, by adopting the A2AD strategy, India may benefit much more. The recent successful test of a 1500 km+ range hypersonic missile is good development in this direction.
- India's space-based ISR capabilities need to scale up. Currently, capabilities are limited to nine satellites. France and India are now collaborating to jointly operate a maritime surveillance constellation of eight to 10 satellites over the IOR.
- the Indian Navy has leased two Sea Guardian HALE drones and plans to procure 22 assets in total. India has also concluded an agreement for the procurement of 31 x MQ-9B Reaper HALE drones from General Atomics, which includes 15 for the Navy and eight each for the Air Force and Army. This would give a major boost to India's ISR capability in the IOR. In addition, these drones include weapons capability.[43] Coordination of drone operations over the IOR as a multilateral effort would be most productive.
- India must procure a long-range bomber fleet to enhance its deterrent and strike options.

Simultaneously, the above must be accompanied by addressing the Indian Navy's shortfalls in ships and submarines. India's long-delayed 30-year ship and submarine building programs need to be accelerated.

China's increasing influence and role in the IOR is a given, with its focus on enhancing its power and influence in the Asia-Pacific, Eurasia, and the world. With BRI as its master strategy for economic integration, China is also pursuing a dominant position to become the world's leading technological and military power. Xi Jinping's 'China Dream' is not only about China becoming a world power by 2049, but also seeks to alter the international norms and global institutions to reflect a more 'multipolar' (i.e. more China-centric) world order. As China's maritime, air, space, cyber, and global expeditionary capabilities increase, it is likely to project its power and assert its views aggressively. To ensure the stability of the current liberal and rules-

based world order, it is necessary for leading democracies and liberal governments to restrain China to conform to international norms. Multilateral groupings like the Quad can be effective in addressing the security challenges posed by China, but it will need much more to address the economic and technological challenges that China will pose in the coming years.

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7

New strategic imperatives for air and space power in the Indian Ocean region: an Australian perspective

PETER HUNTER

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become a cockpit for geostrategic rivalry, where great powers are competing for influence, typically below the threshold for military conflict. To counter the prevalence of China's coercive statecraft, it will be increasingly important for Australia to weave air and space power into more holistic applications of the elements of its national power.

To that end, this paper proposes a model of multi-domain influence, whereby traditional air and space power operations, including in intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and information warfare (IW) are recalibrated and broadened to enable their application in broader campaigns of influence and in circumstances other than war.

In particular, this shift will require different thinking about the use of air and space power tools to render them relevant to contests that involve winning without fighting.

Fortunately, the sophisticated tools available through the air and space power domains are highly adaptable, and therefore applicable in such campaigns of influence.

But, recalibrating air and space power paradigms in this way will require closer collaboration between partners in the IOR if China's coercive statecraft is to be more effectively countered. Building on strong relationships between regional air forces, including those of Australia, India, Japan, Indonesia and the United States, will be vital.

Australia's national security paradigms challenged

The last decade has exposed some grave challenges for Australia's national security paradigms. This has brought into sharp focus the need to integrate air and space power into more comprehensive approaches to statecraft geared to contending with non-traditional threats, ranging from climate-induced disasters, to pandemics, to the preponderance of political warfare and grey-zone methods, which now characterise state-level competition in the Indo Pacific.

While all this has been going on, the IOR has become a cockpit of geostrategic rivalry. Unsurprisingly, the major driver of change is China. And while China's dependence on the maritime trade routes passing through the IOR marks the region a logical nexus for Chinese interest, Beijing's palpable intention of rewriting the regional order to suit its own interests, and its use of coercive statecraft to achieve those ends, are cause for concern among other regional powers.

Moreover, China's growing interests in the IOR have seen it extending its engagement and influence. This includes its ability to protect Chinese citizens and commerce, its conduct of expeditionary maritime activity, its broader interests in growing its soft power reach, and its ability to conduct intelligence collection against the US and its allies, but above all, by enhancing its use of coercive diplomacy against regional states. This shift has seen a commensurate rise in China's military presence in the IOR.

To support these strategic interests, China's military expansion program has involved major investments in shipbuilding, personnel, basing, operations, training, and civil-military coordination. This campaign has a focus on maritime power projection, including aircraft carriers, surface combatants equipped with helicopters designated for anti-submarine warfare, logistics supply vessels,[1] and nuclear-armed submarines.[2] The preponderance of these efforts in the IOR has been in the maritime domain, whereas for air and space power, the bulk of China's effort has been on capabilities relevant to contesting US power in East and Southeast Asia, with comparatively little focus given to the IOR.

So, notwithstanding the strategic significance of the IOR to China's security and prosperity, the region's vast size and its great distance from the Chinese mainland pose significant challenges to China's ability to project power through

the air domain. Merely to gain access to the region, Chinese military aircraft would need both to transit international airspace, and to secure overflight permissions when transiting sovereign airspace, with the latter being subject to monitoring and possibly interception.

Moreover, for China to be able to broaden the utility of its air power beyond combat operations, it would need to develop capabilities in the IOR that encompass humanitarian missions, UN peacekeeping, disaster relief, and counterterrorism. In addition, its air and space power assets would need to be woven into broader campaigns for enhancing China's influence. For China to meaningfully bolster its strategic presence among IOR states would require it to enhance the logistic backbone that air and space power also needs – including long-range transport, and the support of basing options. To shore up its strategic interests in the IOR's sea lines of communication, China would also need to invest in land-based maritime patrol aviation, including both long-range aircraft, and basing options.

Expanding China's air power capabilities in the Indian Ocean

Notwithstanding these strategic imperatives, China's investment in these fields has been relatively modest. According to Chad Peltier, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) transition to an expeditionary force has:

> Been hindered by a lack of transport and replenishment capabilities, including strategic lift and tanker aircraft … In the short term, the PLAAF acquired ten [Russian] Il-76MD strategic transport aircraft between 2012 and 2015 as well as three Il-78 tankers from Ukraine between 2011 and 2016 … [but] these aircraft are stop-gap capabilities until China can complete the development and production of indigenous designs, which are focussed on the Y20 heavy transport aircraft.[3]

In that light, the PLAAF will not be able to conduct long-range missions of a broader variety unless it can gain assured access to overseas airfields:

> The PLAAF's deployment capacity of combat fixed-wing fighter and bomber aircraft is currently extremely limited outside of military airshows and exercises, and is limited by the lack of dedicated overseas military bases and tanker aircraft.[4]

Indeed, the distances involved in reaching the IOR pose serious challenges for China's force-projection goals, as Michael J Green and Andrew Shearer observed: "long distances from ports in Southern China would make for attenuated supply lines vulnerable to interdiction".[5]

Together, China's efforts to secure overseas basing options, its program of developing air and maritime force-projection capabilities, and its civil-military integration strategy reveal Beijing's determination to extend its influence in the IOR. Given the tangible impact on its national interest these themes represent, it is prudent therefore to expect that, just as is the case in the South and East China Seas, China will deploy its holistic, coercive approach to wielding the elements of its national power to protect and enhance those interests.

This will involve holistic Chinese statecraft, which combines aspects of political warfare, grey-zone escalation, and economic coercion. As Australia's experience of China's malign influence shows, Beijing's playbook of combining threats, cyber espionage and economic blackmail remains its preferred way of wielding power and influence. It is important to note that the PRC draws on multiple arms of statecraft to generate these effects, so it is a mistake to focus exclusively on how they might be applied through any particular domain, such as air and space. Rather, the emphasis needs to be on correctly identifying the strategic nature of the threat, and on finding more effective ways to counter it.

Winning without fighting

The concepts of political warfare and grey-zone are widely used to describe the actions of competitor states in the IOR. Political warfare describes how competitors like China are employing tightly coordinated campaigns to use every aspect of their national power through covert, coercive and corrupting methods to win influence and control.

These actions are pursued in grey-zone scenarios: their purpose is to achieve the rival power's strategic interests below the threshold of outside intervention. Recognising the costs and risks of engaging in direct military confrontation, the goal is to impose influence and coercion while not provoking a military reaction. This is winning without fighting.

This raises the question of how Australia's instruments of national power, including its air and space power, should be employed in the IOR to counter these problems, and, more positively, to create opportunities to enhance Australia's interests.

China's approach to coercive statecraft in the Indo-Pacific deliberately blurs the distinction between war and peace. Rather than seeing war exclusively as the presence of armed conflict, this strategic behaviour suggests that sub-conventional means, including information, ideology, economic, subversive and diplomatic methods, are considered just as effective (if not more so) than armed violence. This is a paradigmatic shift from the West's traditional understanding of war.

So Western notions of deterrence, dissuasion and denial will need to adapt to this different reality. While Australia may seek to deter Chinese military action, if it

cannot deter other forms of state aggression such as economic coercion or political interference, then the value proposition of military capability as an element of national power will only be of limited utility. Unless a more holistic version of Australian national power is adopted which deters and defeats other forms of coercion, then the extensive investment in military capabilities may be of little avail.

Evidently, a more holistic appreciation of deterrence is required if Australia's sophisticated air and space power capabilities are to contribute to whole-of-government approaches to countering the effects of coercive statecraft in the region. This must start with a more fulsome understanding of what is being deterred.

New frames of reference

Breaking out of 'more-of-the-same' solutions will require unconventional thinking. If Australia is to play its strengths to the aggressor's weaknesses, it will be vital to harness Australia's intellectual capital by including academia and industry in the formulation of unorthodox solutions. Weaving Australian defence's operations and capabilities into a wider concept of national influence will be the key. If Australia is to more effectively counter the destabilising effects of China's coercive statecraft, then defence will need to complement the other elements of Australia's national power and contribute to long-term campaigns for enhancing our security and prosperity.

So, where previously Australia's armed forces have focussed on force projection as a definitional requirement, the time has come to weave defence's capabilities into broader options for influence projection. Rather than narrowly focussing on dominating the battlespace with forward-deployed force elements, air and space power can broaden its value proposition to complement whole-of-government efforts to out-position rival powers in economic, diplomatic, and informational influence campaigns. As China has amply demonstrated, coercion does not necessarily involve the application of physical violence: influence comes in many forms, and can apply to peace-time and wartime situations, as well as those in between.

In the IOR, this underscores the benefits that will arise from cooperation in unorthodox aspects of military operations. While traditionally the military focus has been on combat power and the delivery of force, the contemporary proliferation of alternative vectors for influence, including in the information and economic domains, has lent a new urgency to considering more holistic models. NATO has suggested that "even lethality, the ultimate penalty of physical force, is giving way to abstractions of perception management and behavioural control, a fact which suggests that strategic success, not tactical victory, is the more coveted end state".[6]

Broadening air power's value-proposition: multi-domain influence

For Australia's air and space power to contribute to influence projection, a focus on strategic effects including deterrence, influence and counter-influence is required. To this end, air power's value will be measured by:

- its ability to deter, deny and discourage traditional military threats
- its contribution to deterrence and counter-influence options that prevent behaviours and policies by regional powers that are inimical to our own interests, and
- its contribution to Australia's ability to positively influence outcomes in the region in support of its national security goals.

This will require a strong emphasis on air and space power's contribution to whole-of-government approaches to wielding the instruments of national power – namely: diplomatic, information, military and economic (DIME). The ability of air and space power to contribute to these broader requirements will require a focus on:

- access and influence: by maintaining and building military cooperation and alliances, air power can underpin deterrence and regional influence. Air power can contribute persistent access and presence in the Indo-Pacific in support of national influence measures.
- exposure: air power capabilities can contribute to effects which expose and discourage grey-zone actions.
- cost-imposition: when rival states persist in unacceptable behaviours against Australian interests, air power effects will contribute to cost-imposing responses. This would require innovative recalibration of air power roles and missions to enable asymmetric effects in this context.

Multi-domain operations (MDO) have become an important way of thinking about how Australia can fight and win in the event of conflict. There is an imperative for air and space power to capitalise on this model by broadening it to suit the winning without fighting environment now prevalent in the IOR. Since MDO works by drawing on synergies from one domain to win asymmetric advantage in another, there is no reason to limit it exclusively to combat scenarios. Australia should be exploring how it can achieve synergies across domains to generate access, presence, influence, deterrence, denial and counter-coercion.

In the context of broadening air power's value in the IOR, this will require a much more integrated approach to working within whole-of-government efforts. And, since political warfare and grey-zone activities typically do not revolve around a contest of arms, then air power may, depending on circumstances, often be in a supporting role to whole-of-government influence effects.

Information warfare: a subset of influence

IW involves those actions taken to affect adversaries by influencing decision-making processes, information and information systems. While this is fundamental to the overall objective of influencing an adversary, it is important to emphasise that IW is only a subset of the full range of activities that Australia may take to wield national influence.

Within the IW concept are nested information-related capabilities. Broadly, these are the categories of operation or activity that can be employed by themselves or in combination to contribute to the desired strategic effect. Among others, these may include:

- information operations
- public affairs and public diplomacy
- deception operations
- cyber operations
- electronic warfare.

For maximum effect, it will be important to apply an MDO approach across this spectrum of operations. Air power practitioners may wish to explore how effects in any one of these influence domains might complement the others. And just as analysts think of MDO as a pathway for combat synergies, so too they could be looking at how to achieve influence through joint force integration. How might Australia's army, navy and air force elements cooperate to achieve synergies and force multiplication in the fight for influence? What are the specific capabilities each service brings, and how can they cooperate?

This would require significant coordination and integration across all domains including air, land, maritime, space and cyberspace. The need to interlink effects across these domains also underscores the importance of moving away from platform-centric thinking. Defence planners no longer have the luxury of thinking exclusively in terms of the roles, missions or capabilities of any one platform. Realising the full potential of a cross-domain, influence-oriented joint force will require significant emphasis on enablers including data, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, logistics, force generation and above all, people and the diversity they bring.

Equally, this multi-domain logic could be broadened to whole-of-government applications. The improved value proposition the joint force brings to government comes through horizontal escalation. By linking the various influence operations the Australian Defence Force can achieve to whole-of-government DIME efforts to wield national influence. Australia can generate maximum impact in the regional high contest environment.

Similarly, this approach could be broadened to international partners. Australia should continue exploring pathways for multi-domain influence operations in partnership with the US, Japan, Singapore, India, Indonesia and the Pacific Island countries (among others). But where once Australia viewed international engagement as a secondary activity to enhance its operations, it should instead be foundational to everything air power contributes to national influence.

Giving priority to effects above platforms requires a disruption to the linear logic which once saw battlefield dominance as the maximum value that air power can provide. While Australia must maintain those capabilities, they should instead be considered the minimum viable product that air power delivers, and that it also exists to broaden the options available to government. Since this will need unconventional (non-linear) thinking, Australia needs creative options for generating strategy-to-mission pathways. Small teams could undertake war gaming, design-thinking, and liaison with other departments, industry and academia. Through such engagement, Australia could more quickly move from the higher-order strategic effects (influence, deterrence, counter-coercion and the like), through an MDO approach to influence operations, to generate concrete guidance to operational communities on the missions we will ask of them.

So, what for air power? Guiding principles

While air and space power's role in providing air combat power for national defence is immutable, and combat excellence must remain its baseline, in light of the competitive IOR security environment Australia now confronts, it is vital to broaden air power's value beyond straightforward war-fighting capabilities.

Air power must be able to conduct operations with and through the joint force across Australia's spectrum of international engagement, from cooperation to competition to conflict, in order to influence other state and non-state actors. As part of the joint force, air and space power must contribute to Australia's ability to wield its instruments of national power – including DIME – to enhance national security and prosperity.

Political warfare and grey-zone activities will substantially affect the Indo-Pacific's regional security environment. So, although air power and the joint force must continue to provide combat power for Australia, there will be many international security challenges that will not be suited to force-on-force engagement but will nevertheless require astute Australian statecraft. Air power and the joint force must broaden the options available to whole-of-government efforts to wield Australian influence.

Multi-domain influence operations, in addition to combat power, will enable air power to provide broader options in response to the changing strategic environment.

Notes: chapter 7

1 Chad Peltier, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations* (Washington DC: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2019), accessed 9 November 2024. https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-logistics-capabilities-expeditionary-operations. According to Peltier, this fleet expansion includes (among others) 29 destroyers, 28 frigates, four to six aircraft carriers, six to eight helicopter carriers, eight to 10 amphibious warfare ships, and four to eight replenishment ships.
2 Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future*, (Melbourne, La Trobe University Press, 2020), 212. According to Medcalf, China is acquiring at least five "Boomers".
3 Peltier, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations*, 52.
4 Peltier, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations*, 54.
5 Michael J Green and Andrew Shearer, "Defining US Indian Ocean Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2012): 180.
6 Kelly and Paul *Decoding Crimea. Pinpointing the Influence Strategies of Modern Information Warfare,* 5.

8

The littoral seam: the littoral operating environment and future of amphibious power in the Indian Ocean

PETER J. DEAN

This chapter focuses on three key areas in relation to littoral regions and amphibious power in the Indian Ocean. It will first discuss the importance of the littorals as an operating environment. Second, it will consider the re-emergence of littoral warfare as a key focus area of major power competition and potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific and the broad applicability and importance of amphibious capabilities in the Indian Ocean littorals. It concludes with a consideration of the role of anti-access, area denial (A2AD) technology on amphibious warfare in the littorals and China's vulnerabilities as it moves from a posture of denial of the United States in the western Pacific to force projection in the Indian Ocean.

Background

In mid-November 2008, the MV *Al-Hussaini* quietly slipped its moorings and left the port of Karachi in Pakistan. After heading out to sea, the vessel loitered between 20-25 kilometres southwest of the city before a rendezvous with a "mid-sized vessel" that transported a cargo of 10 men and their equipment on board.[1] From there, the

vessel sailed along the well-ploughed route down the coast of Pakistan towards Bhuj and the Indian state of Gujarat. On the following day, the MV *Al-Hussaini*, with its now seventeen-men crew on board, intercepted and hijacked the Indian fishing trawler MV *Kuber*. The *Kuber*'s crew of five were captured, with four transferred to the *Al-Hussaini* – later to be murdered. The captain of the *Kuber* remained on board, and was forced to navigate the vessel the next 550 nautical miles to Mumbai.[2]

As they neared their destination, the 10 men who had seized the MV *Kuber* beheaded the captain. They then boarded two small inflatable boats and landed separately on the coast in the southern part of Mumbai.[3] The terrorist attack that followed is well known to history. Often referred to as 26/11, the attack by the 10 members of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistan-based Sunni Islamic extremist organisation, lasted four days and resulted in the deaths of at least 174 people.[4]

The potential for this type of operation was not lost on the Indian authorities. On the night of 26 November, an Indian vessel on a routine patrol had passed by the *Kuber* and interrogated it with binoculars. The scrutiny was close enough to cause the new crew of the *Kuber* to "take positions and alert their Lashkar bosses".[5] However, the Indian vessel noted the *Kuber*'s local registration and moved on. Subsequently, the terrorists failed to destroy their satellite phone and GPS device which would provide key evidence as to the origins of the attack and the route they took to their objective.[6] It has been argued that the Indian Navy and Coast Guard had been lacking in respective security efforts. It has been reported that alerts from India's overseas intelligence gathering agency, Research and Analysis Wing, had alerted authorities that an attack via the Arabian Sea was "imminent". This warning had come from a phone call intercept on 19 November, which led to a step up of patrol activity, but these operations were abandoned on 22 November as patrols were unable to detect anything.[7]

The use of a maritime and littoral approach route by Lashkar-e-Taiba was very deliberate. It was designed to avoid a land or airport border crossings and the associated security check points that any such approach would have been subjected to. Instead, the terrorists chose to use the maritime littorals as their infiltration route: that, is the "coastal region", "between extreme high and low tides".[8] Using the captured Indian fishing trawler, the terrorists hid in plain sight amongst the coastal shipping traffic using the trawler for deception and camouflage.

In pure military terms, this terrorist attack is an example of an "amphibious raid". US Joint Publication 3-02 *Amphibious Operations* defines this as "an operation involving a swift incursion into or the temporary occupation of an objective to accomplish an assigned mission followed by a planned withdrawal".[9] Amphibious raids are often characterised by being independent operations, covert, small and focused on missions such as securing information, capturing personnel, confuse/

deceive an adversary or, in the case of the Mumbai terrorist raid, being part of a broader campaign to degrade and disrupt an enemy. What makes this terrorist operation different to most conventional amphibious raids is that the required planned withdrawal component was to be achieved through the terrorists achieving supposed martyrdom. To them, 'paradise' in heaven was their withdrawal objective.

What the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008 highlights is the broad manner in which littoral regions and amphibious capabilities can be used to achieve security objectives. While terrorism is not the focus of this chapter, this incident serves to remind us that the littoral operating environment and amphibious capabilities and operations are not restricted to nation states, but cut across the entire breadth of the conflict spectrum from humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) operations to full-scale conventional conflict. Indeed the littoral nature of the operating environment has a major impact on the nature of geo-economic and geo-strategic competition. Most of the key security and environmental challenges in the maritime domain involve the littorals, including terrorism, piracy, drugs and arms smuggling, irregular migration, people smuggling, trafficking in human beings, poaching of marine species, narcotics trafficking and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.[10] Littoral regions are also critical in the areas of conflict and cooperation that are typically below the threshold for military conflict – a prime example being developments in grey-zone activities in the South China Sea, such as China's actions in land reclamation and exerting its nine-dash, now 10-dash, line claim.

The littorals and the Indian Ocean

One of the great challenges in talking about the littoral regions is to agree on a common definition that accurately reflects the nature of the geographical environment. The term littoral is derived from the Latin *litus*, which means shore.[11] Often it is simply recorded as the coastal region or the area along a shoreline. The US Marine Corps – a force that prides itself on being a preeminent force for littoral operations – defines the littoral as:

> In naval operations, that portion of the world's land masses adjacent to the ocean within direct control of and vulnerable to the striking power of sea-based forces. (NTRP 1-02) B. The littorals comprise two segments of operational environment: 1. Seaward: the area from the open ocean to the shore, which must be controlled to support operations ashore. 2. Landward: the area inland from the shore that can be supported and defended directly from the sea. (JP 1-02)[12]

Milan Vigo argues that this approach is too broad and imprecise and that "littorals, properly speaking, encompass areas bordering the waters of open peripheral

seas, large archipelagos, and enclosed and semi enclosed seas".[13] Where they interact with large open oceans such as Africa and India they extend outward to the "farthest extent of the continental shelf … the average width … being between two hundred and five hundred miles. The depth of the water … averages 250 feet".[14] Peripheral seas, he argues, are the ocean areas that border the land mass and are "partially enclosed by peninsulas, island chains, or archipelagos", e.g. East and South China seas, and the Indonesian archipelago.[15]

'Littoral operations' can be seen as a concept broader than coastal defence, amphibious and riverine operations, or the US Marine Corps Expeditionary Advance Base Operations. These are all, fundamentally a subset of littoral operations, which operate alongside discrete land operations and discrete 'blue water' naval operations. These all being a subset of maritime strategy.[16]

The importance of the littorals areas in the Indian Ocean is profound. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) contains 36 littoral and 14 adjacent hinterland states, consisting of more than 2.6 billion people, or 40 per cent of the world's population.[17] A key factor in the changing emphasis on the importance of the littoral operating environment is the changing character of these littoral states. Throughout the IOR, urban littoral centres have expanded, and the maritime superhighways that support the flows of people and trade are of increasing importance. The main east-west maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean are overwhelmingly concentrated in or near the littorals. These routes largely hug the coast lines, emerging from key choke points in the Southeast Asian archipelago such as the Strait of Malacca, running up through the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, sliding around Sri Lanka, drifting along the Indian coast line and either flow up the west coast of India into the Arabian Sea and the Gulf states, or cut across the broad expanses of the ocean to the Gulf of Aden or Kenya where once again they hug the coast of East Africa. Other routes strike out from Southeast Asia to the southern tip of Africa, driving past Australian territories of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands or from Sri Lanka to the tip of Africa past the Chagos Archipelago, Mauritius and Reunion Islands, traversing not far from the coast of Madagascar.

These maritime super highways carry two-thirds of the world's seaborne trade in oil, 50 per cent of the world's seaborne container traffic, one-third of the world's seaborne bulk cargo and the world's highest tonnage in the seaborne transportation of goods, reportedly involving some 100,000 ships annually transiting the Indian Ocean and its adjacent waterways.[18] Increased traffic on these maritime routes, compounded against growing populations and economic activity, have increased the importance of the IOR's littoral zones. It is within littoral zones around the world that the majority of populations reside and where trade and economic power is concentrated. Seventy per cent of the world's population and virtually all centres of international trade are in

littoral regions. Among the 63 most populated global urban areas (with five million or more inhabitants), 72 per cent are located on or near the coast, with two-thirds in Asia. In the Indo-Pacific area over three-quarters of the population live within 200 kilometres of the coast. Eighty per cent of cities, most of the vital infrastructure and the key hubs of trade, industry and military power are found within this zone. By 2025, it is estimated that 75 per cent of humanity will live in coastal areas. Nowhere is this phenomenon more concentrated than in the Indo-Pacific.[19]

It is in the littoral zones, where global passages of trade and power converge, that cooperation, competition and conflict are playing out most intensively. Recently the vulnerability of these littoral areas has been further highlighted by the more than 40 attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden launched by Houthi rebels between November 2023 and January 2024. This has caused major disruptions to commercial traffic and led to an multinational response force operating in the area.[20] The Houthi's actions and the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack highlights not just the different ways in which conflict and disruption can be carried out by non-state actors, but it also highlights ongoing points of contest, competition and conflict in the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and South and West Asian littoral. More broadly this area is critical not just in terms of India-Pakistan rivalry, but also in terms of ongoing tension in the Strait of Hormuz choke point and the emerging China-India competition. As C Raja Mohan notes, the Arabian Sea "hosts the energy resources so desperately needed by both China and India".[21] Mohan also comments that moving east along the long Indo-Pacific littoral "in the Bay of Bengal, the contestation is sharper, given the traditional Indian primacy in these waters and Beijing's emerging ability to challenge it and China's deepening stakes in the Malacca Strait".[22] Mohan also notes the importance of subregions in the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific strategic system. Given the diversity and sweep of both of these geographical strategic areas, Australia's defence department asserts that in the Indo-Pacific, "security architecture is, unsurprisingly, a series of sub-regions and arrangements rather than a unitary whole".[23]

As such, the IOR can also be divided into littoral subregion states, each with unique security challenges and different characteristics. These include:

- the South Asian littorals: Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and British Indian Ocean Territory (Chagos Archipelago)
- West Asian littorals: Iran, Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States
- East African littorals: France (Reunion, Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands), Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, and Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros
- Southeast Asian and Australian littorals: Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand.

Littoral warfare and the Indian Ocean the 21st century

For the US Navy and Marine Corps, the littoral operations area is the "geographical area encompassing the seaward and landward portions of the battlespace and the airspace above that is of sufficient size for littoral forces to accomplish assigned missions."[24] This definition is derived from a 2017 official US Navy report aimed at refocusing the US Navy and US Marine Corps' role as regards the littorals. However, what the report de-emphasises is that this operational environment is anything new – far from it. Since time immemorial, the intersection points of the land and seas have always been important. Sea power theory has also been cognisant of this fact. As Julian Corbett famously noted:

> Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.[25]

Corbett's statement, beyond the self-evident factors of human existence, highlights the inherent joint nature of this operating environment. A key difference between the open ocean and the littoral is the more complex and challenging geography of the littorals. The spaces at the intersection of land and sea are inherently confined operating environments. They often include offshore islands, archipelagos and shallow waters. They also contain the part of the land interior within the range of ship borne weapons or land-based weapons that can strike out to the sea (this is one of the fundamentally changing aspects of this operational domain and technology especially as missile technology and hypersonics start to radically impact the changing character of war).

The US Navy's focus on littoral regions grew following the Cold War when the doctrinal emphasis went from command of operations on the seas to, in 1992, the projection of naval power 'from the sea'. This strategic concept moved the US Navy from focussing on "blue-water combat in the open ocean to littoral warfare and joint operations with other services."[26] 'From the sea' soon evolved to 'forward from the sea' which expanded "the strategic concept … to address specifically the unique contributions of naval expeditionary forces in peacetime operations, in responding to crisis, and in regional conflicts".[27] This reflected the US Navy's dominance of the global oceans as the sole remaining superpower and the shifting emphasis (at that time) from great power competition to broader human security concerns.

Since then, the focus on peacetime operations, in responding to crises in the littorals has only grown and is set to continue into the future. With the vast majority of strategic infrastructure and population centres within 25 kilometres of the coast,

access in the littoral regions is essential to providing to support for HADR operations. The most versatile maritime assets for such operations are amphibious ships, vessels and forces. Amphibious operations being "a military operation launched from the sea by an amphibious force to conduct landing force operations within the littorals" and an amphibious force being a "task force and a landing force together with other forces that are trained, organized, and equipped for amphibious operations".[28]

Specialist amphibious forces can provide levels of operational access not seen in capabilities designed for open ocean manoeuvre. Globally, only five per cent of the coastline is accessible via man-made infrastructure and can easily be used by ships and craft to unload and support a variety of operations, while 25 per cent of beaches can take landing craft, 75 per cent of coastlines are accessible by hovercraft and small boats can access 95 per cent.[29]

In recent decades, HADR missions have been growing in importance for regional militaries. The Boxing Day 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami was one of the largest in recorded history and cost over 226,000 lives.[30] A key feature of the HADR response to this disaster was the prominence of amphibious capabilities from US, Australian, Indian and Japanese navies. For the Japanese this was its "largest overseas military operation since World War Two".[31] Meanwhile, Indian defence commentator Ajai Shukla noted that the Indian Navy's response to the tsunami "led the US Navy to realize that here was a maritime partner worth having [and] that realization jump-started the Indo-US defence relationship".[32]

In 2008, Cyclone *Nargis*, which devastated Myanmar and led to the deaths of 138,000 people, was another natural disaster in which amphibious forces sought to play a prominent role. However, the Myanmar government rejected assistance from the US Navy, and indeed initially all international humanitarian aid, driven by fears of the US using the natural disaster as a pretext to invade the country. This had a major impact on the way in which international aid was used and delivered.[33]

Soon after Cyclone *Nargis* struck, the USS *Essex*, a landing helicopter dock ship with 23 helicopters on board, along with two US aircraft carriers, stood ready to assist. However, the Myanmar military rejected the use of US helicopters and landing craft and only initially allowed C-130 cargo aircraft to land. Myanmar also required that no aid was to be distributed by US or any other foreign personnel. In the end, the USS *Essex* was ordered by the US government to leave the disaster zone. This created major difficulties in delivering aid and most certainly cost lives. Its serves as a reminder that accessing the littorals is not just a physical and military problem, but a political one as well.[34]

In contrast, following Cyclone *Mora* which struck South Asia in 2020, a group of the Indian Navy's "biggest warships ... NS *Jalashwa*, *Kesari*, *Magar*, *Shardul* and *Airavat,*" all amphibious ships,[35] were deployed to countries in the Bay of Bengal

(including Myanmar) to return Indian citizens stranded abroad and deliver supplies, medical teams and medicines, boosting India's image as a net security provider in the IOR.[36] India's success in responding to this natural disaster was achieved through a combination of physical capabilities and political and military access. The availability of such access, or its denial at the political, military of capability levels, will have a major impact on the future operating environment in the Indian Ocean littorals.

The demand for HADR responses in the littorals will intensify in the coming years. Ongoing climate change and global boiling means that coastal cities, especially in South and Southeast Asia, are expected to see significant increases in average annual economic losses between 2005 and 2050 due to flooding.[37] In addition much of the rapidly growing urban-littoral areas on the Indian Ocean rim suffer from inadequate infrastructure, which heightens vulnerability to natural disasters, including increasingly from climate change-related rises in sea levels and extreme weather patterns. In 2018 a 'modest' amplitude tsunami stuck Indonesia, killing 437 people and injuring tens of thousands.[38] This event, along with recent cyclones and other natural disasters, has highlighted growing risks faced in the region, as people, infrastructure, and wealth are concentrated into increasingly exposed urban centres, in the most hazardous parts of the planet.[39] Increased instances and increased devastation from natural disasters such as these are necessitating even greater demands for military forces, especially amphibious forces, capable of operating in the littorals.

Moving up the conflict spectrum from HADR to force protected evacuations, peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations, maritime security and low-level operations, amphibious forces frequently demonstrate utility in the Indian Ocean. At the turn of this century, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) found itself leading a UN-sponsored peace enforcement operation, INTERFET, in East Timor, in which the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) amphibious ship HMAS *Tobruk* and three heavy landing craft proved to be vital assets. Significantly though, this operation was hamstrung by the unavailability of the RAN's two 8,500-ton Landing Platforms Amphibious. This was somewhat offset by the availability the USS *Belleau Wood* (LHA 3) to provide heavy lift capability with Marine Corps CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters. In that instance, pointedly, the US was the supporting force, with Australia taking the lead. The US amphibious forces and their combined combat power served mainly as a deterrent to Indonesian intervention in East Timor with direct military force. The US provided broad support to INTERFET with amphibious forces, deploying six ships in the period of 1999–2000.

Despite the RAN's limitations in this element of INTERFET its commander, General Peter Cosgrove, would state that Australia's amphibious assets in this littoral region were a "capability of first resort". Cosgrove's observation was to prove prescient given the centrality of the ADF's response to rising violence in East Timor

in 2006, which included HMAS *Tobruk* and Australia's two Landing Platforms Amphibious in an Amphibious Ready Group which landed "an infantry battalion group within three days, including armoured and support vehicles and three Blackhawk helicopters. They did so entirely over the beach, as, unlike in 1999, the Dili harbor facilities were not secured".[40] This operation led to changes in Australian naval ship building plans. The new amphibious ships under consideration doubled in size in the 2003 Australian Defence Capability Review. This reprioritisation led to the building of two large Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) ships, HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Adelaide*, which at 27,500 tons each are the largest warships the RAN has deployed.[41] More recently the 2023 Defence Strategic Review recommended to the Australia government the adoption of a new strategic approach in response to the rise of China. This Review highlight the littoral and archipelagic nature of Australia's region and called upon the Australian Defence Force - and specifically the Australian Army - to undertake major reforms to focus on littoral operations.[42]

In the 2000s, amphibious ships and forces from multiple countries were used against pirates in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. The inherent flexibility of the amphibious ships and their abilities to deploy larger numbers of helicopters and small craft make them ideal for such operations. Amphibious ships also give the operational flexibility of being able to strike targets ashore using integrated landing forces, if required.

Amphibious forces have also been particularly prominent in fighting terrorist organisations. In September 2012, the Kenyan military used an amphibious manoeuvre against Al-Shabaab.[43] From the early 2000s the US made heavy use of the Indian Ocean from which to conduct operations in Afghanistan. In 2001, the US Navy and US Marine Corps pushed the boundaries of modern understanding of the littoral zone by projecting conventional forces by helicopter from a US Navy-USMC Amphibious Ready Group some 371 nautical miles from offshore Pakistan to Kandahar Afghanistan to establish a forward operating base.[44] This was one of five US Marine Corps amphibious operations as part of Operation *Enduring Freedom* in 2001 alone. In 2002, the US Marine Corps conducted amphibious operations off Djibouti and the Horn of Africa as part of counter terrorism operations.

Many other nations have used amphibious forces in counter-piracy efforts and operations in their littorals. Importantly, in 2010 the PLAN deployed its first amphibious vessel, the *Yuzhao*-class amphibious transport dock ship to counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. This was seen as an expansion of PLAN capabilities and ambitions.[45]

Operations in the lower end of the conflict spectrum, including HADR, security operations, counter terrorism, piracy, maritime security, and counter-insurgency operations and limited conventional conflict are unlikely to subside in coming years.

In fact, many of the drivers that are likely to cause an increase in such missions could also result in more conflict-orientated operations. Climate change and its impact on the conditions for conflict are, as Albert Palazzo commented, "an existential crisis". This crisis "threaten[s] the survival of numerous states, particularly those that are less able to adapt to harsher climatic conditions and resource shortages. In combination, these factors will produce a more dangerous and violent world".[46]

The changing strategic order

Another major change in the IOR security environment comes from major power competition, which raises the potential for high-end conventional operations in the Indian Ocean littorals. Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update noted growing military modernisation, increased great power assertiveness and the new Chinese military bases, resulting in much "greater potential for military miscalculation" in the region, and that the prospect of high-intensity military conflict in the Indo-Pacific is "less remote".[47]

Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review placed a renewed and much stronger emphasis on the Indian Ocean and noted that the "Indo-Pacific regional security situation is now characterised by strategic competition between the major powers; the use of coercive tactics; the acceleration and expansion of military capabilities without necessary transparency; the rapid translation of emerging and disruptive technologies into military capability; nuclear weapons proliferation; and the increased risk of miscalculation or misjudgement".[48]

The relative decline of the US and rise of India and China as major powers is changing the dynamics of the Indian Ocean maritime space. In 2017, as part of Beijing's stated desire to contribute towards humanitarian relief efforts and UN anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, China opened a military base in Djibouti with a capability from 2021 to host PLAN expeditionary forces, potentially including an aircraft carrier.[49] Reports have also emerged of a potential PRC 'spy base' on Myanmar's Coco Islands in the Bay of Bengal.[50] These reports come at the same time that there is a renewed focus on PLAN activities at Cambodia's Ream naval base.[51]

As the IOR region remains central to Chinese growth and development, a major justification for the PLAN presence is to ensure the security of their commercial engagements and maritime trade. Thus, pressure for an increased PLAN presence and operations in the IOR will only grow. The base at Djibouti is part of a longer-term trajectory by the PLAN, which in early 2014 (and almost every year thereafter), has sent a surface action group into the eastern Indian Ocean.

The 2014 foray included the *Changbaishan*, a Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock that at over 20,000 tonnes was at the time that largest indigenous-

built PLAN vessel. This operation, the US noted, was designed to "demonstrate to the Indo-Pacific region that China's combat reach now extends to the eastern Indian Ocean".[52] Since 2017, the PLAN's survey and hydrographic ships have become a regular feature in the Indian Ocean. The PLAN is now the largest navy in the world (by number of ships), and there is speculation that it will soon establish an Indian Ocean fleet.[53] However, as Christopher Colley has noted, "beyond its anti-piracy missions and naval presence, for political and technical reasons, the PLAN is currently unable (and possibly unwilling) to officially establish an Indian Ocean fleet that could supposedly dominate the region".[54] More significant is the PLAN's growing underwater capability in the IOR, with PLAN submarines deploying into the Indian Ocean since 2013. PLAN submarines often follow on from the operations of their hydrographic ships.[55]

For India, increasing competition with China is particularly focused on the Bay of Bengal. This area includes key regional states such as India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, extensive littoral areas, the choke point at the entrance to the Strait of Malacca that connects the eastern Indian Ocean with the western Pacific and the Indian-controlled Andaman and Nicobar Islands that "form a long north-south stretch that provides a strategic perch to dominate the eastern Indian Ocean".[56] As Mohan noted in 2012 "as long as China, India, and Burma were looking inward, the Bay of Bengal seemed a backwater and attracted little strategic attention". But this dynamic has now changed, especially following heightened tensions between China and India since clashes on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas in 2020. However, as Arzan Tarapore has noted the increasing Sino-Indian conflict on the LAC has seen the transfer of Indian military investment away from the Indian Navy and back to the Indian Army and Air Force. This is restricting Indian maritime power in the Indian Ocean as Chinese power continues to grow.[57]

There are also potentially significant changes under way for US power in the Indian Ocean (see chapter 1: US naval strategy in the Indian Ocean). The US 2021 Global Force Posture Review is indicative of a draw-down of significant forces in the Middle East, to concentrate on great power competition with China in East Asia, a process that it has been trying to achieve for over a decade.[58] The most visible manifestation of this was the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which served to reassure US allies in the Indo-Pacific.[59] This was backed up by the US 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy (NDS), which made the PRC the pacing threat and clearly focused US strategy on the Indo-Pacific. In addition to the revitalised Quad partnership under the Biden administration, the 2022 NDS noted that "The [U.S.] Department of Defense will advance our Major Defense Partnership with India to enhance its ability to deter PRC aggression and ensure free and open access to the Indian Ocean Region".[60]

It still remains unclear what the future US role and presence in the Indian Ocean will be, especially as much its presence in the region was driven through transiting forces from the Pacific Ocean to operations in the Gulf. However it is clear that the Indian Ocean is an economy of force region for the United States and it is looking for greater involvement by its Indian Ocean partners, especially India, Australia and the United Kingdom. This question has driven debate in Washington as to the relative balance of interests and efforts for the US military between the Indian Ocean and East Asia, with some commentators arguing that a US focused on the Indian Ocean would be an "Indo-Pacific folly".[61]

On top of the increase in great power competition has come rapid military modernisation by a number of Indo-Pacific countries and the changing character of war in terms of technology and tactics. Since the mid-1990s, China has worked relentlessly to reform its military forces, concentrating on A2AD capabilities. This A2AD "operational concept leverages technological developments in long-range anti-maritime weapons, networking and sensors to target naval forces, with precision, over a large portion of the western Pacific".[62]

China's A2AD concept is designed to limit the US military's ability to project force into the western Pacific – especially through its carrier battle groups, surface actions group and expeditionary strike groups (which are built around amphibious forces). The concept of A2AD is nothing new in littoral warfare. Rather its re-emphasis is a return to the long historical battle in warfare between offensive and defensive capabilities in the littorals that were only interrupted (in the Indo-Pacific), by the dominance of the US Navy from the battle of the Philippine Sea in 1944 until the early 2000s. A2AD is a modern term, but harks back to the days of the struggle between ships and forts for control of key locations in the littorals.

The most significant change in modern A2AD capabilities is the dominance of missiles in naval warfare, whether they be ship-, submarine-, air- or land-based. These missiles come in numerous forms, including theatre, ballistic and cruise. Combined with pervasive intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, missile capabilities, engagement ranges, lethality and precision have all increased.[63] Questions about the US Navy's ability to dominate the littoral regions of the western and mid-Pacific have generated debate about the utility and survivability of amphibious forces in the now highly contested littoral zones of the western Pacific.

Conversely, as China looks to expand its military presence in the Indian Ocean and to project power beyond its First Island Chain in the Pacific, it may make itself vulnerable to similar A2AD capabilities that it has utilised in an attempt to counter US force projection capabilities. This dynamic will create particular dilemmas for the PLAN, as India, Australia, the US and other countries around the India Ocean rim deploy their own A2AD capabilities. This is a particular focus Australia, which

is currently undertaking its biggest ever peace time navy recapitalisation in modern times, which includes much more capable missile-firing air warfare destroyers and future frigates, and a doubling of its submarine force.[64] Australia has also announced an indigenous missile manufacturing capability, a procurement program for long-range land-based fires (LAND 8113) for its military and increased long-range missiles for its fifth-generation air force.[65]

In addition, the 2023 DSR placed a direct effort on deterrence through denial with allies and partners, a denial strategy for the military and a rapid expansion of land-based missiles, integrated air and missile defence, a 'littoral army', a focus on asymmetric capabilities, A2AD capabilities and a significant expansion of local manufacturing of long-range missiles. This is on top of the earlier announcement of the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines through the AUKUS agreement and massively increased US force posture initiatives in the north and northwest of Australia.[66] The most significant of these moves has been the announcement of the AUKUS pact. The precursor to this sovereign Australian capability is the establishment of Submarine Rotational Force West (SRF-W) in the Indian Ocean at HMAS Stirling, near Perth. This base will see the rotational of forward deployed US and UK SSNs from 2027.[67]

In 2020, India announced an expansion of its own capacities including a long-range, missile-launched anti-submarine torpedo.[68] The expansion of such capabilities in the Indian Ocean would mean a much more contested environment for any PLAN force projection efforts in the eastern Indian Ocean. Countering such forces would require the PLAN to invest in different capabilities and operating concepts such as more sophisticated aircraft carriers and the expansion of military bases in the Bay of Bengal to provide land-based air power into the region. Alternatively, China may have to accept the fact that it may well be a too great a risk to operate large surface action groups or amphibious forces in the IOR, in any conventional high-end conflict.

The rise of A2AD capabilities does not mean the end to amphibious operations at the higher end of the spectrum. Indeed, as outlined above, the critical nature of these regions means that militaries are adapting to the changing character of war. The US Marine Corps is undertaking major structural and doctrinal reforms in order to challenge China's capabilities and operate inside the First Island Chain of the western Pacific.[69] This includes the creation of three Littoral Combat Regiments.[70] These regiments are smaller, lighter, missile-equipped and feature a Littoral Combat Team, a Littoral Anti-Air Battalion and a Littoral Logistics Battalion. They are designed to operate more geographically distributed, with the emphasis more on how the Marines can contribute to the US Navy's sea control mission. These regiments have been described as "low-signature, bad attitude" units with "toolkits full of distributive

capabilities" designed to "lurk and move among the littorals, initially in the Pacific, deterring China by holding its surface fleet and maritime air assets at risk".[71]

In addition, operational planning for littoral and amphibious operations in high-end conventional operations are moving to more of a distributed basis, factoring in new technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, automation and cyber capabilities, which are being integrated into force projection capabilities. However as BA Friedman has noted, while amphibious operations are "far from obsolete" at the higher end of the conflict spectrum, traditional amphibious assaults will be limited. Indeed China, India, and Russia would not be able to generate the capabilities for large-scale amphibious operations in highly contested environments without "decades of investment". Even the US, which is in a "class of its own" in this area of operations, is limited in its effectiveness in amphibious assaults. This is placing much more emphasis on amphibious raids to temporarily seize and control ports, key maritime features including straits, rivers and canals, as well as other operations such as commerce ship boarding operations as part of *guerre de razzia* – naval irregular missions and maritime raiding ashore.[72] All of these factors will become increasingly important in the Indian Ocean as competition, posturing, presence and the potential for conflict amongst the great powers escalates.

Conclusion

In summary, the littoral regions of the Indian Ocean are only growing in importance. This is being driven by the economic rise of the IOR and the concentration of populations, power and infrastructure in the littoral areas. Issues such as climate change, the persistence of terrorism, competition and conflict in these regions will only drive the need for more amphibious capabilities to conduct military operations in the littorals. As competition between the great powers in the region rises, it brings the impact of new capabilities, technology and operational concepts to the region. While these are developing more rapidly in the Pacific Ocean at present, inevitability, with great power competition and as the PLAN expands it reach into the Indian Ocean, these changing dynamics of naval power and amphibious operations will make themselves even more present in the Indian Ocean. In the littorals, the major regional powers such as India, the US and Australia have natural positional advantages and China faces corresponding challenges if it wishes to exert greater power in the IOR. This is highly dependent on China's Belt and Road Initiative delivering on economic expansion, as well as the expansion of Chinese military presence in the region. If this is successful and China's interests grow, this new dynamic may well drive a greater PLAN presence in the region, which would heighten tensions, and challenge power structures. All of which would be played out in the littoral zones of the Indian Ocean rim.

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9

Australia as an active middle power in the Indian Ocean

RORY MEDCALF

Australia's 21st century embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept as a basis for external policy has recognised and reinforced the importance of the Indian Ocean in that country's strategic environment. This reflects at least six overlapping factors, notably: the role of Indian Ocean sea lines of communication in global trade and energy flows (and thus Australia's own prosperity); the emergence of India as a strategic partner; the impact of China's expanding interests, presence and influence along the so-called Maritime Silk Road; transnational security challenges, from piracy to people smuggling, terrorism to environmental issues; Australia's leveraging and defence of its own Indian Ocean geography; and prospects for partnership with a diverse range of Indian Ocean players in addition to the more obvious cooperation with the United States and other Quad partners India and Japan. While the first three factors (sea lanes, India and China) are already large and will remain salient, the second three (transnational issues, Australia's geography and new partners) are likely to grow in significance. There will also be pressure for Australia to adjust its stance of taking minimal interest in the western Indian Ocean.

The challenge ahead is threefold. At a minimum, Canberra needs to craft an Indian Ocean policy that is more holistic and active (indeed activist) than hitherto: not merely reactive, issue-specific or overridingly India-focused. Ideally, this would amount to an Indian Ocean strategy, embedded in a wider and whole-of-government Indo-Pacific strategy.[1] Elements of such an approach would include: integrating all six factors identified in this chapter; breaking down artificial delineations between

the eastern and western Indian Ocean; and emphasising the dynamic connections between Indian Ocean policy and a wider Indo-Pacific strategy. This does not mean a fully-fledged 'pivot' to the Indian Ocean at the expense of the Pacific or Southeast Asia, but rather a recalibration of both limitations and ambitions for the nation's western front. This chapter makes a case for such a rounded policy, building on aspects of Australia's history as an Indian Ocean nation.

Navigating by history: an uneven journey

The relatively new Indo-Pacific orthodoxy in Australia's external policy should have cemented the critical importance of the Indian Ocean on this country's horizon of national interests. Certainly there has been much progress since the 1990s, when the Indian Ocean occupied a peripheral role in Australia's strategic environment. Notably, the 'East Asian Hemisphere' propounded by Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in 1995, defined Australia's region in a way that largely excluded South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as if the world ended just off the coast of Western Australia.[2] Even in the early 2000s, when the 'war on terror' and closer US-India ties began to draw Canberra's attention westward, the primary focus remained on an Asia-Pacific strategic environment essentially encompassing East Asia and the Pacific. To be sure, Australia's more global security engagements, since at least 1915, had an Indian Ocean dimension, but that was essentially as a transit route for forces travelling to further theatres, most repeatedly the Middle East. The survival of Australian troops crossing the Indian Ocean, at risk from Japanese submarines, is what literally kept Prime Minister John Curtin awake at night during the Second World War.

When it came to Australia's own sense of its region, the Indian Ocean was often not considered integral. This was the 20th century pattern, where Australia's diplomacy and force posture tended to privilege the nation's eastern and northern fronts; these, after all, had been the zones of Japanese advance and incursion during the Second World War, the nation's darkest strategic hour to date. That said, it was not as if the Indian Ocean was entirely undiscovered by Australian defence planners. It had been the place of vital British Empire sea lanes and important naval engagements in both world wars, and in the 1970s–80s a theatre of competition with the Soviet Union. Thus helps explain the establishment of the Royal Australian Navy's 'Fleet Base West' HMAS *Stirling* and the joint US-Australia naval communications station at Exmouth, both in Western Australia, as well as aerial surveillance of the northeast Indian Ocean under the decades-long Operation GATEWAY. Nonetheless, the overall priority in Australian external engagement – as an amalgam of foreign, defence and economic policy – remained the Asia-Pacific, reinforced by the 1999 East Timor and 2003 Solomon Islands interventions, support for regional diplomatic architecture centred

on the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the weight of Japan and then China as Australia's largest trading partner.

Movement towards a more consistent Indian Ocean orientation began in the final term (2004–2007) of John Howard's conservative government, with improved Australia-India ties ending the chill after the 1998 Indian nuclear tests. There was also the Australia-US-India-Japan core group responding to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which in 2007 briefly translated into the original Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or 'Quad,' as well as Australia's participation with other Quad members (plus Singapore) in the massive India-US Malabar naval exercise. The Howard government, and all that followed, also intensified Australia's surveillance of Indian Ocean waters against transnational challenges, notably the seaborne people-smuggling and other 'irregular' boat arrivals – including refugee flows – that were to prove so sensitive in the nation's political debate.

The subsequent Labor government of Kevin Rudd initially complicated relations with India with its unremitting uranium export ban and active indifference to the stillborn Quad. (It should be noted of course that India and Japan were also cautious in progressing the Quad at that time.)[3] However, Rudd at least foreshadowed stronger attention to the Indian Ocean in 2009, with his government continuing Australia's longstanding naval role in the western Indian Ocean, including sending a frigate to join counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. The Labor government also produced a defence white paper judging:

> Over the period to 2030, the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to our maritime strategy and defence planning.[4]

This was a time of growing international interest in the Indian Ocean as a theatre of geopolitical significance, with rising attention from think tanks and academia, which had some resonance in Australia.[5] A clear articulation of an Australian Indo-Pacific policy began in 2013 with the Defence White Paper of the Labor Government of Julia Gillard. This memorably redefined Australia's region of strategic interest as an 'Indo-Pacific arc', shaped by:

> China's rise as a global power, the increasing economic and strategic weight of East Asia and the emergence over time of India as a global power … key trends influencing the Indian Ocean's development as an area of increasing strategic significance.[6]

Both the 2009 and 2013 Defence White Papers promised an expanded Australian maritime force, including 12 advanced conventional submarines, but neither provided a costed pathway to get there. The Gillard government also advanced relations with India, including an in-principle decision to lift Labor's blanket ban on uranium sales.

That said, it was the subsequent conservative governments of prime ministers Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison that began to define and deliver a more concerted Indo-Pacific policy. This would involve not only an enhanced strategic partnership with India (involving, for example, bilateral naval exercises beginning from 2015), and harsh if effective responses to illegal boat arrivals (mostly from across the Indian Ocean), but also gathering concern about the strategic impact of China's economic, political and security influence in the Indian Ocean, defined by Beijing from 2013 as part of its Maritime Silk Road strategy. Australia's 2013–2015 chairing of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, coordinated with the preceding Indian and succeeding Indonesian chairs, brought moderate progress in making that unwieldy institution relevant to regional needs.[7] Likewise, Australia chaired the Indian-initiated Indian Ocean Naval Symposium from 2014 to 2016. Canberra's growing Indian Ocean focus was influenced and vindicated by such episodes as China's annual naval exercises near Australia's island territories (beginning in 2014) and the Australian-led search for the missing Malaysian airliner MH370 in 2014.[8] The fact that, from 2007 to 2018, the Minister for Foreign Affairs or Minister for Defence – and briefly in 2013–2014 both – hailed from Western Australia also helped ensure some consistent level of emphasis on the Indian Ocean.

Building on Abbott's efforts, the Turnbull government in 2016 released a Defence White Paper that finally began costing and building a modernised maritime force to defend stability and a rules-based order in an Indo-Pacific that was becoming the global strategic and economic centre of gravity.[9] In 2017, this was complemented by a Foreign Policy White Paper that reinforced the Indo-Pacific character of Australia's region and influenced a wider international trend towards Indo-Pacific policies. This especially involved 'minilateralism:' self-selecting small groups of nations working together on the basis of shared interests, values, capabilities and readiness to act, and this was alluded to as 'Indo-Pacific partnerships' with 'small groupings': dull language, but a significant change in Australian statecraft.[10] The US, India, Japan and Indonesia became notable partners for Australia in that regard. The revival of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue, initially at officials' level, began in 2017. The following year, an India Economic Strategy led by former foreign secretary Peter Varghese laid out an ambitious long-term partnership with this emerging great power.[11] France, too, acquired a special status in Indo-Pacific policy under Turnbull, partly through his close working relationship with President Macron, partly through a recognition of the continued role of France in the region as a resident power, and notably through the mid-2016 decision to award French state company DCNS the large contract to build conventional submarines for the Royal Australian Navy. Macron even called grandly for an 'Indo-Pacific axis' – a trilateral with Australia and India – as a stabilising force in regional diplomacy.[12]

By August 2018, when Turnbull was succeeded by Morrison, the elements of a basic Indo-Pacific strategy were becoming apparent.

Despite these developments, Australia's comprehensive adoption of an Indo-Pacific framework did not mean a consistent or sustained elevation of the Indian Ocean in national priorities. Indeed, even as Australia and many other nations were becoming more concerned about China's influence across the wider region, specific anxieties developed in Canberra related to Beijing's role in the Southwest Pacific. From early 2018, these spilled into the public domain, including assessments that China was seeking to expand its economic interests into political influence and even a security presence – perhaps a military base – across the small island states to Australia's east.[13] The South Pacific was being designated by China as a kind of branch line of the Belt and Road. For Australia, it had long been an assumption of defence policy that no potentially hostile major power would have a military foothold in the South Pacific, and a priority to ensure that remained the case. Now this was being challenged. Maintaining Australia's role as preferred security and governance partner in Melanesia rapidly emerged as a first-order issue, overriding the emerging importance of the Indian Ocean and challenging even the emphasis long placed on Southeast Asia. The result was the Pacific Step-up of the Morrison government, a strategy involving large commitments of development assistance, government-directed infrastructure spending, security partnership, education cooperation and diplomatic attention. The subsequent Labor government of Anthony Albanese directed even more resources and high-level focus to contesting China in the Pacific. Whatever the intrinsic merits or effectiveness – which are yet to be fully evaluated – the sheer scale of resources and attention devoted to the Pacific constrain the capacity for Australia to make itself a decisive power in the Indian Ocean.

During the 2020–22 phase of COVID-19 and other strategic shocks, Australia's foreign policy tendency was to look in multiple directions to contend with concurrent disruptions. Thus, for instance Canberra simultaneously sought to: sustain the Pacific Step-up; deliver financial and other support to struggling Southeast Asian partners; follow through on a comprehensive strategic partnership with India; push the ambition of a summit-level Quad; pursue regional and global geoeconomic diversification to cope with Chinese coercion; manage a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan; and hold its own as a global player on issues like pandemic response and democratic solidarity. All this had to be managed while addressing the domestic societal, health and economic impacts of COVID-19, an isolated position on climate policy, an intense chill in relations with China, and a degree of uncertainty in relations with Southeast Asia and Pacific island nations. It was an enormous set of demands on national capabilities and political attention and will. During this time, deficit spending allowed some continued modernisation of military capabilities, and

resourcing of the development assistance programs focused increasingly on national interest goals – concentrated on competing with China in the Pacific – rather than aid narrowly defined. All these indicators foreshadowed a future in which Australia would need to do more with less, as globally and regionally its relative economic weight declines.

The election of a Labor government in May 2022, under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, did not fundamentally change the reality that interest-based demands on Australian capabilities are more than the nation can address single-handedly, reinforcing the need for prioritisation. As of late 2024, the Albanese government had been reasonably successful in 'stabilising' diplomatic relations with China and improving Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, including through a policy framework of 'strategic equilibrium' aimed at balancing deterrence with respectful diplomacy.[14] A Defence Strategic Review in early 2023 reiterated that the Indo-Pacific remained the nation's key strategic geographical framework, and noted that an 'immediate region' of priority for national defence should include the northeast Indian Ocean.[15] The footprint of Australian maritime security exercises and partnerships remained Indo-Pacific, including Australia's hosting of the 2023 Malabar activity with India, Japan and the US, albeit in the Pacific. There was, however, no progress in advancing an encompassing Indian Ocean strategy, and, if anything, an intensified focus on the Pacific and Southeast Asia placed further limits on the resources and attention devoted to the Indian Ocean, other than to a continued prioritisation of full-spectrum partnership with India. An energetic and engaged Assistant Foreign Minister, Tim Watts, led Australia's engagement with Indian Ocean countries other than India – worthwhile to be sure, but also a reflection that they were not first-order priorities for Foreign Minister Penny Wong. An Indian Ocean conference in Perth in early 2024 was helpful at signalling at least some continued Australian interest in the region. It convened ministers, officials and experts from around the littoral, including east Africa, with a focus on discussing sustainability rather than hard security.[16] This was an Australia-India collaboration, and did not generate policy departures or major new investments: more holding pattern than landmark.

One departure from 2021 onwards was the significant Indian Ocean dimension to a radical initiative in Australian defence policy, initiated under Morrison in September 2021 and sustained under Albanese. This was AUKUS, the trilateral strategic technology sharing arrangement with the United Kingdom and the US, aimed primarily at enabling Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) to add to deterrence against China.[17] This will have mixed effects on the prospects for a future Indian Ocean strategy. On the one hand, it reinforces the naval and indeed undersea dimension of Australian defence modernisation. The AUKUS

submarine ambition, if fulfilled, will dominate the nation's defence investments for at least a generation. This will have a significant Indian Ocean focus, reinforcing the importance of the HMAS *Stirling* naval base and Australian operations and deployments into the Indian Ocean, even if only sometimes as transit to East Asian waters. AUKUS will involve US and UK nuclear-powered submarine forces visiting or 'rotating' through HMAS *Stirling*, as well as eventual patrols by an Australian-flagged SSN fleet. On the other hand, AUKUS did immediate damage to Australia-France relations (through the surprise abandonment of their own major submarine deal), scuppering the strategic vision of Macron and Turnbull. Moreover, at least at the level of perception, too much of a policy emphasis on AUKUS could distract from the reality that Australian engagement in the Indian Ocean is not solely military.

None of this should foreclose the prospect of Australia more actively and thoroughly prosecuting its interests as an Indian Ocean power. But the imperative for government will be to find ways to integrate such policy with broader objectives in a financially and diplomatically economical manner; to identify the synergies among different Indian Ocean interests, in order to gain multiple effects from diplomatic investments; and to strengthen and leverage a more creative array of partnerships.

Six factors: a blueprint for integration

Against this background, there are at least six identifiable factors contributing to Australia's contemporary Indian Ocean policy settings. These are:

- the role of the Indian Ocean sea lines of communication in global trade and energy flows (and thus Australia's own prosperity)
- the emergence of India as a strategic partner
- the impact of China's expanding interests, presence and influence along the so-called Maritime Silk Road
- transnational and human security challenges, from piracy to people smuggling, terrorism to environmental issues
- leveraging Australia's Indian Ocean geography and protecting associated interests
- prospects for more diversified partnership, including with the 'smaller' powers of the Indian Ocean, such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and with global stakeholders such as France and Britain.

Each of these factors has had some relevance during the history of Australia's Indian Ocean engagement – for instance, the first factor (sea lanes) was vital during the World Wars, while the fourth factor (transnational issues) has been consistently prominent for at least the past two decades. What is distinct about the 2020s, however, is that all factors are active at once.

Sea lines of communication: The Indian Ocean is crucial for international trade, accounting for more than half of the world's shipping container traffic and 70 per cent of global trade in oil and gas.[18] While much of Australia's seaborne trade and energy importation (notably refined transport fuels) is with ports in East Asia – notably in Singapore, China, Japan, and South Korea – these flows in turn rely on those economies' dependencies on the Indian Ocean for shipping to and from the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and ultimately Europe. Accordingly, as has been the case since the beginnings of its European settlement in 1788, Australia is acutely reliant on the Indian Ocean for its prosperity and sheer economic survival. Accordingly, Australia plays a part in sea lane security in the Indian Ocean as well as the wider Indo-Pacific, notably through maritime surveillance and limited operations such as frigate deployments to the western Indian Ocean.

India: India is now a first-rank strategic partner for Australia, across an ambitious agenda ranging from trade, investment and military cooperation to critical technologies, cyber security, space, education and research.[19] The security agenda has tended to eclipse economic and societal engagement, and much of that will remain focused on the maritime domain. From a situation of mutual neglect just a generation ago, Australia and India perhaps have the opposite problem: the risk of placing unreasonably high expectations on their security relationship. In particular, critics of the Australian Government's enthusiasm for the India relationship argue that Delhi will not take major risks on Australia's behalf.[20] That said, high-end naval exercises, information sharing and a degree of strategic policy coordination are becoming the norm, and this new closeness may manifest also in logistics, access arrangements and operational cooperation, in parallel with India-US and Quad activity.

China: The coercive use of China's strategic weight is Australia's primary security problem, and will likely remain so for years.[21] Simultaneously, China's interests, presence and influence in and around the Indian Ocean have become integral to that country's global ambitions. The potential for China's interests to clash with those of other powers in the Indian Ocean is growing, at the same time as the need to identify the contours of coexistence and even cooperation.[22] Just as China has a significant part in many of the region's security problems – from great-power tensions, hegemonistic behaviour, and resources pressures like over-fishing – so too will those problems be insoluble without an active Chinese role in regional security. The likely continued growth of Chinese power in the Indian Ocean can be expected to keep generating Australia effort, attention and resource-allocation, especially across military, diplomatic and intelligence fronts.

Transnational and human security issues: The emphasis on the Pacific by the Morrison and even more so the Albanese governments makes it likely that the Pacific will continue to eclipse the Indian Ocean in Australian attention to many transnational

issues like public health, resources pressures, governance, underdevelopment and the impacts of climate change. However, the character of these problems is similar across both oceans, and their scale in the Indian Ocean greater than in the Pacific, even with the pressing difficulties of Papua New Guinea on Australia's northern doorstep. After all, future trends analysis identifies the Indian Ocean littoral as the world's greatest zone of risk from the confluence of climate change, natural disasters, resource and population pressures, developmental disparities, urbanisation and political instability.[23] A research project supported by Australia, France and India has identified a matrix of environmental risks, broadly defined, that will grow in complexity and scale as transnational issues intersect with great-power competition, especially China's expanding presence.[24] Moreover, some of Australia's most sensitive transnational security concerns – notably the illegal or unregulated movement of people by sea – will continue to have a large Indian Ocean dimension, and a large part of Australia's maritime surveillance and constabulary effort will likely remain in that direction.

Leveraging location and protecting interests in Australia's Indian Ocean geography: Whatever the geopolitical tides or trends, geography itself is a constant. This means permanent geographically defined interests to protect, but also a strategic location to leverage. Australia will be an Indian Ocean power regardless of the trajectories of India and China. Australia's credibility and security as a middle power and a sovereign state will depend in part on its ability to monitor and exert authority in its vast westward maritime zones, and to maximise the use of coastal and island access points, such as the airstrip on Cocos Island. The development of Western Australia is driven largely by export-dependent resource industries that are vital to the wider Australian economy, onshore (from iron ore to lithium) and offshore (notably natural gas). These in turn require reliable infrastructure on the Indian Ocean coast. And Australia's ability to project as a credible security actor will require development and use of its military facilities on or near the Indian Ocean, whether for its own operations, the US alliance or new partnerships and coalitions.

Diversified Indian Ocean partnerships: The predominant potential of India and the many actual or prospective partners in Southeast Asia and the Pacific have not entirely overwhelmed Canberra's capacity to cast its net of security cooperation more widely in the Indian Ocean. This involves: Indian Ocean resident nations such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka; Indo-Pacific and global partners such as Japan, Britain and of course the US; and France, a country that uniquely fits both categories, notwithstanding the post-AUKUS limits to Australia-France strategic trust. Bangladesh is emerging a as a significant new partnership. During the COVID-19 crisis, Canberra stepped up pandemic assistance to Dhaka and a Foreign Ministerial visit there in 2019 underscored growing trade and investment links. There has been

academic policy advocacy for closer defence and maritime security ties.[25] Australia can also build useful relationships with some strategically located small Indian Ocean island states, building on its expertise in the Pacific. These could potentially provide valuable access in contingencies (or otherwise reduce the risk of potential adversaries gaining access).

France remains a serious regional partner: after all, it is a resident power with territories and population in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is a global stakeholder in the regional order and a driver of wider European involvement. There is a gradual rebuilding of Australia-France relations following the AUKUS rupture, although levels of trust and aspiration will remain cautious. Paris was able to target much of its AUKUS disappointment at the departing Morrison government, and a January 2023 '2+2' foreign and defence ministers' meeting revived a broad agenda of cooperation including in the Indian Ocean and trilaterally with India.[26] Indeed, the trilateral with France and India demonstrates that closer Australia-India relations can reinforce, rather than compete with, a diversified web of partnerships.[27] Moreover, France is not the only EU nation that matters in the Indian Ocean. This region is a focus for the EU maritime capacity-building initiative Crimario, concentrating on affordable options for maritime domain awareness.[28] Italy, the Netherlands and Germany are among EU countries beginning to deploy naval forces on extended exercises across the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific.[29]

There is likely to be sustained and renewed interest in an upgrade of Australia-UK security cooperation across the region, in line with AUKUS and Britain's declared Indo-Pacific 'tilt', as reflected in the 2021 UK 'Integrated Review'.[30] Although the British Labour Government of Keir Starmer is likely to reinforce its security focus on Europe – unsurprisingly in light of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine – there is also recognition in Britain now that the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic strategic theatres cannot be treated in isolation, not least because of the Russia-China axis.

Turning to Southeast Asia, there need not be a distinct line between Australia's engagement with ASEAN and its Indian Ocean policies. After all, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand can credibly be defined as Indian Ocean littoral states. Australian diplomacy seeks to engage Indonesia through a wider regional lens, including in a nascent Australia-Indonesia-India dialogue. In 2019, Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour taskforce incorporated bilateral exercises with Sri Lankan, Indian and Malaysian forces in its voyage through the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. In 2020, for the first time since 2007, Australia joined Indian, Japanese and US navies in the Malabar drills in the Bay of Bengal, where the following year it would join a five-nation exercise with those partners plus France (part of the biennial La Perouse series of French-led naval drills). The composition of these exercises holds clues to some of the creative coalitions of a more diversified Indian Ocean policy.

In whichever directions these partnerships evolve, the centrality of the alliance with the US to Australia's strategic outlook will most likely remain a given. This has been recast as an Indo-Pacific alliance and involves wide-ranging cooperation across military matters and intelligence, extending more recently to the geoeconomics and technology dimensions of competition with China. That said, it is reasonable to ask how confident Canberra can be regarding US capabilities and posture in the Indian Ocean. As other authors in this volume contend (for instance Nilanthi Samaranayake in chapter 1), it cannot be assumed that Washington is seeking to devote more capabilities to the Indian Ocean theatre; potentially, the opposite. Maturing the Quad and the India relationship could be to a large degree about sharing more of the regional security burden with these partners, especially in zones away from the East Asian pressure points such as Taiwan. In this regard, Australia's Indian Ocean policy can be understood as part of a wider regional web of diversification that is partly intended to demonstrate burden-sharing and thus encourage sustained US commitment. It is fair to assume that Australia anticipates a sustained but not relatively larger US military presence in the Indian Ocean, and will shape its own activities, include access to its territory and facilities, to help cement this. Unless Chinese military power and coercive action in the Indian Ocean grows dramatically in the years to come, this will likely be sufficient as a contribution to wider balancing and provision of public goods.[31]

Integration and activism: towards a realistic Indian Ocean strategy

The expectation that Australia should have an Indian Ocean strategy is not new. Academics and think tanks have repeatedly made the case for at least a decade.[32] But strategy is more than a plan: it needs to involve coordinated allocation of resources, consideration of ends, ways and finite means, and options for dealing with the potentially countervailing actions and strategies of others. There is little point in a middle power like Australia having a strategy for the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean that is more grand than realistic, especially at a time of so many pressures and priorities, from Chinese strategic risk to economic recovery from the pandemic. And a higher priority will be to ensure effective delivery of an Indo-Pacific strategy, of which an Indian Ocean strategy would be a part. Canberra's Indian Ocean policy, therefore, could usefully be guided by the following principles, all based on making the most of limited capabilities. These can guide progress towards an Indian Ocean strategy through coordination of the necessary building blocks. To be sure, some Australian activities – such as the Indo-Pacific Endeavour naval task group – already demonstrate progress in this direction, but the challenge is to make such integrated national effort the norm.

Integration of the six key factors: Policy in any one of these areas needs to proceed in full consideration of the others. This means leveraging the connections between issues and ensuring that each initiative and relationship serves multiple purposes. For instance, improvement of and (with the likes of India, Japan and France) shared access to air facilities on Cocos Island or port facilities in Darwin, would mean utilising Australia's geography and diversified partnerships to enhance monitoring of Chinese naval activity, transnational crime and environmental problems, reinforcing sea lane security and regional order. A signal of Australia's growing willingness to allow partners to access its facilities is the announcement of a temporary Indian satellite tracking station on Cocos.[33] Likewise, a strengthened Australia-India relationship should proceed as part of an 'India plus' not 'India only' approach to regional cooperation. Indeed, working together in the region can be an important way of strengthening the Australia-India partnership. Moreover, Australia's ability to help smaller regional powers – such as Sri Lanka and Maldives – in building civilian maritime security capacity could assist in meeting their resource and human security needs while helping limit China's geostrategic influence.

A more connected perspective on the whole Indian Ocean: A flaw in Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy is the somewhat arbitrary way it appears to define regional boundaries, explicitly excluding the western Indian Ocean and coastal Africa from Australian policy.[34] This is understandable as a device to limit the expectations on Australia's role, particularly regarding the projection of military power. There is clearly a need for Australia to consolidate its capacity to use armed force in its northern, northwestern and eastern approaches. Nonetheless, most of the region's security risks are indifferent to imagined subregional boundaries. After all, this is, quite literally, a fluid region, defined by the connectivity of the sea lanes. It should be possible for Australia to redefine its Indo-Pacific interests in a more flexible fashion, consistent with the Indian, European and Japanese approaches. On some issues, such as China's influence, resource extraction or security presence (including Djibouti and potentially other bases), the western Indian Ocean may matter greatly to wider Indo-Pacific dynamics and thus Australia's interests in preserving a multipolar, rules-based order with a balance of power that protects the sovereignty of small and medium states. A more engaged diplomatic outreach in the western Indian Ocean can be undertaken at relatively low cost, without placing pressure on our limited military resources. This would create foundations for Australia to play a large role – including with military force – across the Indian Ocean if future circumstances required. These shifts and shocks could range from much greater Chinese military activity to intensified US-China or China-India rivalry to a sudden reduction in US presence and engagement. Looking longer term, while Australia realistically lacks the resources or diplomatic bandwidth to be a leader in the western Indian Ocean, or indeed in engagement

with east Africa, it would be prudent to bear in mind that the latter part of this century could in some ways reflect an African century as much as an Asian one. The concentration of projected population growth and potential resource exploitation in Africa is an obvious reason for China's interest – and Beijing's own Indian Ocean powerplay – but also matter intrinsically to the future of global security. This does not mean unrealistic expectations of Australia becoming a major player in Africa – that would be an Indo-Pacific bridge too far. But there may be modest and practical ways for Australia to make suitable niche contributions to wider efforts among US allies and partners to engage Africa and balance Chinese influence there, for instance as a provider of training and education in key coastal countries such as Kenya.

Activism, within limits: Critics and cheerleaders alike of 21st century Australian diplomacy sometimes hearken back to a supposed golden era of 'activist middle power diplomacy' from the 1980s and 1990s, when the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating played a significant role in building regional institutions like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. (It is worth acknowledging, too, that for all his apparent marginalisation of the Indian Ocean in Australia's strategic geography, the then Foreign Minister Gareth Evans played a significant part in supporting the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.) In fact, the spirit of Australian middle-power activism is hardly a thing of the past. It is evident in such initiatives as the Quad, other minilaterals and the successful promotion of the Indo-Pacific concept itself. Generally, however, Australia has taken a more reactive than proactive stance on Indian Ocean issues. Part of the challenge ahead is to reserve some of that Australian capacity for convening and diplomatic enterprise to galvanise initiatives to meet the needs of Indian Ocean countries and stakeholders. This should not be about spontaneous, short-term, politically opportunistic or unilateral activism, but about consultation and partnership – crafting opportunities and building buy-in.

A premium on partnership: The utility of the Indo-Pacific concept is that, by embedding national interests in a large strategic system, it unlocks a wide array of potential security partners. Moreover, a silver lining to China's assertiveness – or perceptions of American unreliability – is the motivating effect on medium and small powers to consult and work together. In the Indian Ocean, as across the wider Indo-Pacific, the objective should be coordination rather than duplication of effort. Australia should play to its strengths: a capable seagoing power with exceptional maritime domain awareness but with forces defined by quality rather than quantity; an experienced provider of capacity-building; a US ally with its own independent agency; and a nation with a strong record of its own inter-agency coordination, which it can use to inform whole-of-government efforts by others. This can extend to Australia exercising its longstanding capacity as a trusted regional convener, with a track record of coalitions as diverse as the search for MH370 in 2013, multiple

rotations of command of maritime Combined Task Force 150 in the Gulf, the Solomon Islands intervention in 2003, the UN-mandated East Timor force in 1999, and the regional peace process in Cambodia in the early 1990s.

Consistency with wider Indo-Pacific strategy: There is little advantage in crafting a fine Indian Ocean strategy if Australia's wider Indo-Pacific strategy is wanting. Perspective is necessary. In the Southwest Pacific or maritime Southeast Asia, great expectations have long been placed on Australia by others. In Melanesia, especially, if Australia does not 'step up' to assist fragile small states in their development and freedom from hegemonistic influence, who will? Again, in Southeast Asia, Australia's long record of security cooperation, development assistance and diplomatic activism means that any large diversion of attention to the Indian Ocean may be seen as a downgrading of effort and a concession to China.

How can Canberra build engagement and activism in the Indian Ocean in ways mutually reinforcing with its efforts in these other zones? A cost-effective starting point is to recognise and accentuate the commonalities of Indo-Pacific dynamics. These include countering Chinese influence, and leveraging multipolarity, and working with regional countries to give them choices and preserve maximum sovereignty in their development paths. Proposals for enhanced Australia-Bangladesh security ties, for instance, can take inspiration from partnerships in Southeast Asia such as those with Indonesia and Malaysia. The needs and circumstances of Indian Ocean island states (e.g. Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius) have many similarities with Pacific island states, where Australia has long experience (and historical baggage). There are many opportunities for Australia to leverage its existing experience in the Pacific (e.g. in fisheries governance, maritime domain awareness) to build potentially valuable relationships with Indian Ocean island states with relatively small investments. The preservation of good order at sea and the maritime commons is not a uniquely Pacific or Indian Ocean issue. In the end, Australia has the opportunity to take advantage of the fundamental characteristic of its geography, a continent but also the largest island in both oceans and their meeting point in more senses than one.

Notes: chapter 9

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10

The Indian Ocean in France's Indo-Pacific pivot

MARIANNE PERON-DOISE

As France develops a powerful Indo-Pacific narrative, one wonders how and where the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) fits this new and ambitious vision of maritime Asia. This chapter explores the challenges posed by this new evolution of French posture, while examining the strategic specificities of the Indian Ocean. In this seascape, which constitutes a crucial maritime crossroads for many naval powers, the French presence is characterised by its preference towards hard power through defence diplomacy and operational partnerships. However, this chapter concludes that France's emphasis on hard power does not prevent it from also being a convincing promoter of inclusive maritime multilateralism. Thus, France is also developing a soft security agenda in the Indian Ocean, focused on the emergence of new threats to the region's blue economy and supporting European maritime capacity-building initiatives.

The genesis of France's Indo-Pacific strategy: playing a greater security role in Asia

The adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept by a growing number of countries shows the importance that seas and maritime security play in contemporary international relations. The international community has in recent years demonstrated the importance it now places on maritime security. The latest significant example is the fight against Somali piracy, which started in 2008 and saw the deployment of up to three naval coalitions in the Indian Ocean: European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). The

navies of India, Japan, Russia, and China also joined this effort in a national capacity. Many of these actors are still in the IOR, scrambling for port facilities and creating the perception of Indian Ocean "militarisation", complete with the resurgence of a kind of "gunboat diplomacy" in which African countries seem to be powerless.[1]

In recent years, countries that prioritise the 'free and open' Indo-Pacific concept have deemed it urgently necessary to organise in order to defend freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. These nations denounced Chinese expansionism in the region and Beijing's non-compliance with the Hague Arbitral Tribunal's 2016 ruling that found China's maritime claims were without legal basis. The United States has intensified its freedom of navigation operations near the disputed waters and holds regular exercises with Japan, India, Australia, and countries from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the area. Both France and other EU member states such as Germany, Italy and Spain have decided to increase their respective naval presences in this region in order to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea by exercising more regularly the right to navigation[2]. However, these countries do not share the same Indo-Pacific vision, nor the same policy towards China.

Among the European countries that claim ties to the Indo-Pacific, France is the only nation that can give prominence to this identity due to its geography. France's narrative stresses its legitimacy, based on its Indian Ocean and Pacific territories, meaning France is the only European country that is part of the Indo-Pacific. Added to this is France's status as a recognised maritime power and its long-standing formative defence cooperation. Its conventional and nuclear naval capabilities make it the EU's leading blue water navy (since the UK's departure from the union). France sees the Indo-Pacific as crucial to its power interests because it has a stake in it. As one of the region's major diplomatic and strategic players, France mobilises significant human, economic, and military resources in this part of the world.

A summary document on France and security in the Asia-Pacific, published in 2014 and updated in 2016,[3] announced the country's "rebalancing towards its Indo-Pacific strategic centre of gravity". As early as 2012, Jean-Yves Le Drian,[4] then French Minister of Defence, announced this "new French commitment" at the Shangri-La Dialogue on Asian security, citing shared security challenges such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, as well as maritime security, which was to become a major point in his subsequent interventions, particularly in 2016.[5] During the 2012 event, while stressing the importance of respecting the law of the sea in the China Seas and French Navy vessels' regular missions in the region, he brought up the idea of European naval forces carrying out coordinated patrols in order to maintain a visible presence and ensure the appropriate use of freedom of navigation. He thus raised two topics around which the French Indo-Pacific vision and strategy are structured: free and

open access to the global commons – including the sea – and the defence of this principle by means of French naval assets or in coordination with European partners. The EU's strategy for the Indo-Pacific[6] published in September 2021 has given substance to this vision with the concept of Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP). This allows the EU to maintain a semi-permanent presence in a maritime area of interest by drawing on the navies of member states deployed for other missions.

This thinking stemmed from the perception of China hardening its maritime claims against ASEAN countries in the South China Sea and against Japan around the Senkaku Islands by using a hybrid warfare doctrine, which combines military and civilian means of coercion. Moreover, encounters at sea between US and Chinese navy ships have become increasingly tense.[7] Florence Parly, France's Minister for Defence, echoed this sentiment at the 2018 session of the Shangri-La Dialogue, calling for more cooperation, and stressing that "fait accompli is not the fait accepted".[8] Her tone was firmer still at the next forum held in 2019. In April of that same year, the French frigate *Vendémiaire* was 'escorted' by four Chinese military vessels as it crossed the Taiwan Strait, a route the French Navy uses regularly. The minister unequivocally stated her country's commitment to defending its interests as a resident power, and to ensuring the region's security alongside its partners, stating that "we will not allow ourselves to be intimidated".

The strategic coherence of France's vision from Djibouti to French Polynesia

President Emmanuel Macron gave a decisive boost to France's Indo-Pacific vision in the speeches he made during two successive journeys to the Pacific, including one he delivered in 2018 at Australia's Garden Island naval base.[9] In it, he described with conviction an "Indo-Pacific axis" formed by France, India, and Australia in order to counterbalance China's hegemonic ambitions and its efforts to establish a new international order through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI's maritime component is largely concentrated on the Indian Ocean's littoral states, manifested by a myriad of port development projects that strongly displeases India, as India considers the IOR its backyard. In Réunion in 2019, the president spoke of France as a "stabilising power", and reiterated France's priority of forging regional partnerships against any hegemon in the region, without naming China.[10]

This deliberate stance in favour of active multilateralism and the defence of international law, including a strong emphasis on building strategic partnerships, is at the heart of the conceptualising work done by French military circles in "La France et la Sécurité en Indo-Pacifique" ("France and Security in the Indo-Pacific"),[11] published by the Ministry of Defence in June 2018 and followed in 2019 by a summary document entitled "La Stratégie de Défense Française en Indo-pacifique"

("French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific").[12] Its analysis presents the Indo-Pacific as a "strategic continuum" from Djibouti to French Polynesia. In August 2018 the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs also published a White Paper defining the country's strategy in Asia-Oceania,[13] and in 2020 it created the position of 'thematic ambassador' (*ambassadeur thématique*) in charge of the Indo-Pacific. France's political ambitions and positioning in the Indo-Pacific have since been developed and conceptualised in the ministry's latest report in 2022[14].

France's desire to organise its capabilities to protect its maritime ambitions is multidimensional in nature. The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change reiterates the importance of protecting the oceans from the effects of global warming. The Indo-Pacific region is particularly affected by cyclones and rising sea levels which threaten the survival of island states. The French military plays a central role in helping to secure the affected areas, often joining forces with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, or working together with India and Australia to prevent and anticipate environmental security issues. The Ministry of Armed Forces has established an Observatory on Defence and Climate which has an important focus on the Indo-Pacific. The initiative which aims to strengthen regional cooperation is supported by the French Development Agency following a holistic approach based on the "three Ds" i.e. defense, diplomacy, development[15]. Indeed, the French Development Agency has also developed a Pacific Strategy for the period 2019–2023 with priorities that address the needs of the region, including climate change resilience and the protection of the blue economy through initiatives to combat illegal fishing. As a sign of the priority France is giving to the Indo-Pacific region, in 2023 the French Ministry of the Armed Forces has set up the Observatoire du Multilatéralisme en Indo-Pacifique (Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific) and entrusted its management to a number of national think tanks. The aim is to provide input for ministerial reflection on a zone subject to growing tensions, where France must rethink its strategic partnerships. An update of the Indo-Pacific strategy is currently being studied, but its publication will be postponed due to the outbreak of violent community riots in New Caledonia in May 2024.

By redefining its foreign policy within a global concept and an inter-ministerial approach, France is re-engaging with Asia by means of a rhetoric of power and new maritime ambitions. It does so in an international context marked by growing tensions between Washington and Beijing which began under the first Donald Trump presidency and intensified under Joe Biden's administration. This situation led French diplomatic and military authorities to continue to articulate their Indo-Pacific strategy. The new AUKUS partnership announced by the US, Australia and the UK in September 2021 came as a shock to France for many reasons. Beyond the crisis of confidence between allies and partners, it does not correspond to the French

approach because it prioritises a logic of military strength in the competition with China by reinforcing a bloc policy. Yet President Macron has explained at length that France's Indo-Pacific strategy is not directed against anyone and proposes a "third way".[16] Thus, while seeking to avoid straining relations with the US, which is inclined to a confrontational posture, French diplomacy has tried to find room for manoeuvre by relying more on the EU[17]. France has heavily influenced the EU's Indo-Pacific approach and Brussels' new geopolitical ambition to play a more active role in Asia's security, particularly in maritime security.

In the summer of 2023, President Emmanuel Macron's trip to the South Pacific – in particular Nouméa and Vanuatu – and to Sri Lanka, gave new impetus to this climate diplomacy and to France's ambitions to embody a "third way". Without explicitly naming China, he repeatedly denounced the "new imperialisms" and a "power logic"[18]. First of all, by stopping off in New Caledonia, Emmanuel Macron highlighted the importance of this territory in building France's Indo-Pacific legitimacy. The aim was to renew dialogue with the pro-independence forces at a time when discussions were beginning on the territory's future status. But the following year, the announcement of a project to reform the electoral body would cause the suspension of all dialogue and spark a long cycle of violence in New Caledonia.

In his subsequent visits to Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, the French President recognised the importance of adapting his Indo-Pacific narrative to the expectations and concerns of France's close micro-island neighbours in the region. In so doing, France is changing scale and adopting a discourse commensurate with its Indo-Pacific geography and its status as an island state. This is why it is working alongside the authorities in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea to combat climate change and protect biodiversity. France is also strongly committed to the adoption of the first international treaty to protect the high seas (marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, or BBNJ). The President is therefore striving to gather the widest possible support for ratification of the treaty at the One Ocean Summit which France will be co-hosting with Costa Rica in Nice in 2025.

The primacy of the Indian Ocean in the French Indo-Pacific construct

In France's Indo-Pacific vision, the Indian Ocean occupies a special place due to the myriad of international militaries present, the growing strategic rivalry between India and China, constant transnational security threats such as piracy and kidnapping for ransom, maritime terrorism, and the multitudinous criminal activities at sea categorised under the concept of 'blue crime'.[19] These issues add a strong African dimension to the French Indo-Pacific, due to the geographical location of the French island of Réunion, which is close to many eastern and southern African coastal states, including Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa. This geography makes it

possible to envisage innovative and multifaceted cooperation between France, India and Japan, two countries strongly committed to port security, ocean governance and connectivity development in Africa as expressed via the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor Project.[20]

France has recently made a clear choice in increasing its reliance on the EU in the Indian Ocean due to the limits of its financial and military capabilities. France is currently very much involved in securing the waters off the Horn of Africa from piracy and those of the island states in the western part of the Indian Ocean, by supporting maritime development projects through the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). This collaboration between France, the EU and the IOC has enabled the establishment of a regional maritime security architecture with the creation of a Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar and a Regional Coordination and Operational Centre in the Seychelles through the Maritime Security, MASE project[21].

In the Indian Ocean, France has the second largest maritime territory of any country thanks to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 2.6 million square kilometres. Its most important possessions are the islands of Réunion and Mayotte. The French Southern and Antarctic Territories, which include the Eparses islands but also Crozet, Saint Paul, Amsterdam as well as the Kerguelen Islands, also extend this zone.

But the French presence still gives rise to regional tension over maritime disputes with neighbouring island states.[22] Comoros does not accept French sovereignty over Mayotte, which is geographically part of the Comoros archipelago, but whose inhabitants chose to remain French in a referendum in 2011. France disagrees with several African countries about the Eparses islands, which are strategically located in the Mozambique Channel. These islands include Bassas da India, Europa, Juan de Nova, Glorieuses, Tromelin. Each island comes with a vast EEZ. Most of these islands (such as the Glorieuses in 2021) were classified as national natural reserves and remain under French control, much to Madagascar's chagrin. While France and Seychelles reached an agreement about Seychelles' claims to Glorieuses, Madagascar is still claiming them and Bassas da India, Europa and Juan de Nova. For its part, Mauritius is claiming Tromelin. Currently, France actively administers the islands, which house a small number of scientists and permanently deployed military personnel. France also undertakes maritime surveillance in the surrounding waters. This delicate context could partly explain France's abstention in May 2019 from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution, which ultimately obliged the UK to hand over the Chagos Archipelago – home to a US military base of Diego Garcia – to Mauritius. The agreement reached in 2024 between the United Kingdom and

Mauritius provides for the final return of the Chagos archipelago, and could perhaps encourage Madagascar to reopen the question of sovereignty over the Eparses islands.

France was quick to understand the benefits of investing in the Indian Ocean's multilateral regional structures and security cooperation mechanisms in order to strengthen its position and influence by actively contributing to regional stability. It is a leading member of the IOC, created in 1982, which groups together the French-speaking island states in the western Indian Ocean (Réunion, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles), where it enjoys a certain pre-eminence as a traditional power. France also became a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) a pan-regional inter-governmental grouping in 2020, where it waited 23 years before being accepted as a full member because of India's opposition.

The consolidation of India and France's joint strategic perspectives has now led the two countries to support each other in international groupings.[23] In 2008 India invited the French Navy to become a member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an important coordination forum for navies, while France facilitated India's observer status in the IOC in 2020, a status China also obtained in 2016. Similarly, France supported the admission of Japan as an observer member in 2020 and noted Australia's active approach to the organisation. Australia's observer status would contribute to increasing the diplomatic space of like-minded partners, i.e. Australia, Japan, India and France, in the western Indian Ocean while strengthening maritime partnerships already established in other important regional bodies such as IORA and IONS.

If the IOC is the privileged and most efficient vehicle for the political, economic and strategic integration of France (on behalf of Réunion) in the IOR, its presence within IORA and IONS also allows it to play a greater role in regional cooperation and maritime governance. Both organisations' focus areas are maritime-centric and can help to develop a regional common understanding and concrete initiatives in the field of the blue economy and maritime safety and security. These areas of effort are in line with the priorities of the French agenda for the region which focuses on the development of a sustainable blue economy and the strengthening of regional maritime surveillance capacities. These themes, as well as the impact of climate change on maritime security, were at the heart of the French presidency of the IOC and IONS from 2021–2023, and are already the subject of cooperation with India and Australia.[24] Aware of the low preparedness levels of regional military forces for climate change-related crises, the French Navy organised a major HADR exercise with Indian support during its two years of IONS presidency.

On the other hand, French influence is more limited in Southern Africa because France does not belong to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the regional organisation of Southern Africa, which includes the other four French-

speaking members of the IOC: Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius and the Comoros. This lack of representation is partly due to the complex relationship between France and South Africa, the tutelary power of SADC, and notably because South Africa remained hostile to French claims on the Eparses islands for a long time. This did not prevent the development of military cooperation between the two countries' armed forces. A joint training exercise, OXIDE, is held regularly on the basis of anti-piracy or anti-drugs scenarios.

This situation makes it difficult to implement a regional response involving France, Portugal and the EU in helping the Mozambique government deal with the jihadist insurgency in the north of the country, which started in 2017 and turned violent in 2021. France is concerned about the security of the southwest Indian Ocean as well as the economic interests of the Total Group – which has had to close its gas installations in and around the Mozambique Channel. France has declared itself ready to assist with military training while continuing its maritime patrol missions in the Mozambique Channel.[25] It supports the EU training mission in Mozambique (EUTM)[26], set up in 2021 to help the Mozambican armed forces restore security in Cabo Delgado province. But, the situation remains confused. The Shebab, who operate in the Cabo Delgado province, plunder the country's natural resources, in particular rosewood, which is trafficked to China.

France actively supports EU initiatives in favour of maritime governance in the Indian Ocean, including the EUCAP Somalia mission dedicated to reforming the maritime security sector and establishing a Somali Coast Guard. France had a decisive role in the launch of the anti-piracy Operation ATALANTA, a multinational naval force in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia. France regularly supports the renewal of the operation's mandate while advocating for its extension to include more capacity-building actions in favour of the region's navies and coastguards. The EU's involvement in regional maritime security and its active participation in the main maritime cooperation fora such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Djeddah Amendment and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia[27], CGPCS, have turned the EU into a maritime security provider recognised by coastal states such as India, Kenya, plus the western Indian Ocean islands including Seychelles.

The EU and France are jointly working to expand maritime domain awareness (MDA) and information sharing by supporting initiatives such as the MASE and CRIMARIO II (Critical Maritime Routes to Indo-Pacific) programs. This latest program, whose first sequence from 2015–2020 focused on the Indian Ocean, has been extended to South Asia, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific until 2025. Its aim is to promote the use of its maritime information exchange and coordination platform, IORIS, to all maritime forces (navies, coastguards and maritime agencies) involved in strengthening law enforcement at sea in all the Indo-Pacific. Secondly, its

other objective is to promote the SHARE IT initiative, which aims to connect the main regional maritime fusion centres based in Madagascar, New Delhi, Singapore, Vanuatu and Peru from the west to the eastern coasts of the Indo-Pacific. The EU, thus, advocates establishing an inclusive maritime multilateralism.[28]

Building on strategic convergence and operational necessity

France maintains a significant military presence and assets in the Indian Ocean in order to assist the international community in securing the main sea lines of communication and straits that are key passages for global trade linking Europe to the Persian Gulf and Asia. France's military presence is a concrete operational reality with a military command based on one 'sovereignty force' stationed in Réunion, and two 'presence forces' in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates, which totals around 4,000 personnel. These forces are complemented by warships regularly deployed from the French mainland to the IOR. The frequency of these naval deployments is essential to maintaining the visibility of France's commitment to the region's security and its capacity to project force.[29] Despite these operational efforts, there is a visible gap between France's strong Indo-Pacific ambitions and the reality of the military resources it is able to commit to the area. A multilateral approach, the development of close defence partnerships, cooperation and joint training with neighbouring armed forces are essential if France wants to intervene effectively in the event of a high-intensity conflict in the region.

France's *Charles de Gaulle* nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and its escort group, and the *Jeanne d'Arc* helicopter cruiser training group are the two naval task forces most regularly deployed in the IOR, in addition to the forces stationed there. These units are important power-projection tools used to underpin France's strategic standing in the region and give substance to its Indo-Pacific ambitions. The *Jeanne d'Arc* group regularly conducts five-month-long missions in the Indo-Pacific, which led to its presence in the South China Sea in 2018. The annual VARUNA exercises, conducted together with India and begun in 1983, have frequently involved the *Charles de Gaulle* and its support group. In the same way, France set up the LA PEROUSE multinational exercise to increase interoperability with its key naval partners. The first iteration, held in May 2019 around the *Charles de Gaulle*, brought together the US, Australian and Japanese navies. The second iteration, organised in April 2021 around the *Jeanne d'Arc* training group, comprised the helicopter-carrier *Tonnerre* and the frigate *Surcouf*, included the US, Australian, Japanese and Indian navies. This Indian participation led many observers to conclude, wrongly, that it was a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) exercise. The French Air Force is also an important component of power projection and intervention capabilities in the Indo-Pacific airspace. Since 2018, *Pégase* missions have enabled French aircraft

(*Rafale* fighter jets and refuelling and military transport planes) to be deployed in the region to take part in multinational exercises. This represents a deployment of more than 11,000 kilometres (South-East Asia) or 18,000 kilometres (South Pacific) from France's bases.

The French base in Djibouti in the Gulf of Aden, which accommodates 1,450 soldiers, is the oldest facility and has been operational since the country's independence in 1977. It is France's most important military contingent overseas. France is bound to Djibouti by a Treaty of Defence cooperation, which commits it to defend the country's territorial integrity. However, France is no longer the only military power present since the establishment of military facilities by the US in 2002, Japan in 2011 and China in 2016. Other powers, such as Saudi Arabia, could take up bases. China has largely consolidated its strategic presence by undertaking important works to develop the container terminal of Doraleh, which it controls, and by building rail infrastructure to Ethiopia. Its intention is to transform it in a transport hub for trade between Europe and Asia.

Added to this, France's naval base in the United Arab Emirates, established in 2009, is home to the headquarters of the French Indian Ocean Regional Command. This command hosts about 700 soldiers and is located at the gateway to the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. It provides operational control of the military component of the European Maritime Awareness in the Straits of Hormuz initiative (EMASOH), a European maritime surveillance mission conducted to preserve freedom of navigation in the Straits of Hormuz. Through its presence, France aims to contribute to stability in the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa by maintaining operational intervention capabilities near these critical straits.

The French Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean – around 2,000 personnel stationed on the island of Réunion – struggle to keep the vast French EEZ free from the threats of piracy, illegal fishing, and the many forms of trafficking, including drugs – much of which transits through Mozambique. Generally speaking, the French overseas forces do not have sufficient patrol boat capacity to manage the huge EEZ. A new program of six units should be delivered between 2020 and 2025 and two of them will be deployed in Réunion. More problematically, the Réunion forces do not have a maritime surveillance aircraft.[30] Aware of the weakness of its military means, France has developed important strategic partnerships and well-structured defence cooperation with many Indian Ocean powers, especially India and Japan. Some partnerships are based on the transfer of major military equipment such as *Rafale* fighter aircraft and *Scorpene*-class submarines, linking France to India. These transfers are accompanied by the development of ministerial-level strategic dialogues in a two plus two format (defence and foreign affairs) and highly structured military cooperation with the signing of important agreements. The purpose of

these agreements is to strengthen the sharing of maritime information between the partners, including the US Navy, and to provide logistical support to facilitate regional force projection.

In 2018, France and India signed a Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the IOR, as well as a mutual logistical cooperation agreement giving reciprocal access to each other's bases. Thus, the Indian Navy can access the French bases in the UAE, Djibouti and Réunion. The two countries are also considering joint maritime surveillance missions in the IOR. India deployed a P-8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft to Réunion in February 2020, an unprecedented initiative that aims to fill the gap in France's maritime aerial surveillance resources in the area and should be renewed on a regular basis. France and Japan have likewise been deepening their respective defence links. These nations have recently signed an agreement for sharing defence supplies and cooperating on technology research. In 2017, France also signed a Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership with Australia and the two countries launched the Australia-France Initiative (AFINITI). In 2018, the two nations signed the Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship[31] that included joint logistical support in the Pacific between respective armed forces to enhance interoperability. The same facilities could be granted to Australian forces in the French bases in the Indian Ocean if it so requested.

The announcement of AUKUS and Canberra's cancellation of the submarine program with France in September 2021 had serious consequences for the existing strategic relationship between the two countries. However, the arrival of a new government in Australia, followed by visits to France by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Defence Minister Richard Marles in July and December 2022, have led to a revival in the political-military relationship between the two countries. It should also be noted that operational cooperation had never ceased between their armed forces, particularly in the South Pacific.

These partnerships include important operational interactions involving regular exercises in a bilateral, trilateral, or other form, such as the MALABAR training exercise. The latter, originally an India-US exercise, is now being promoted as a core activity for members of the Quad, thanks to Australia and Japan taking part in 2020.[32]

However, after the creation of AUKUS, questions arose about the Quad and a Quad Plus format for France, India and also the EU. The Biden administration has actively engaged Asian and European allies and partners in an alliance of democracies in the service of a values-based diplomacy that is embodied in a more multidimensional Quad. So far, India has been reluctant to have the mechanism operationalised for fear that it might be perceived by China as a military alliance designed to counter it. For its part, France has repeatedly shown its concern not to be instrumentalised in an American anti-Chinese coalition by promoting multilateralism and joining the

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) proposed by India for facilitating maritime enhancement with like-minded partners.[33] France prefers minilateral or multilateral ad hoc formats and initiatives in which it would retain greater strategic autonomy, as well as the deepening of bilateral relations with the members of the Quad Plus.[34]

France's involvement in the IOR reflects the level of ambition that the country intends to show at the scale of the Indo-Pacific. Aside from its possessions in the region, France is involved in the IOR as a great power and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which has a specific duty in relation to maintaining peace, security and upholding a rules-based order. These ambitions have translated into an increased presence within the main organisations and fora dedicated to security in the region. The French Navy's sustained level of activity in this region has confirmed its status as a credible power in a seascape marked by the development of Chinese influence but also maritime border tensions, piracy, illegal fishing, and natural disasters. The visibility given to the long deployment of the nuclear attack submarine *Emeraude* in the Asian waters, from November 2020 to February 2021, including its crossing of the South China Sea to the port visit in Perth, illustrates the importance of France's strategic commitment. However, these efforts weigh on its military resources, and will need to be better integrated into defence diplomacy and operational cooperation with traditional partners, such as India, the US, Japan, Australia and fellow European countries.

In this context, strategic cooperation between France and Australia should be further developed, particularly in the field of maritime security, environmental changes and good ocean governance in the IOR. The three areas are linked and are at the heart of a regional MDA architecture that is being consolidated and where closer collaboration between France and Australia, but also India, would be beneficial. Beyond the military dimension and naval diplomacy, a soft security approach and issues linked to the Blue Economy are of great interest for the many island states in the region. Developing maritime surveillance capabilities through capacity building, networking of partners, and information sharing can offer large avenues for trilateral cooperation between the three partners including the EU and its maritime initiatives.

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11

South Africa: balancing priorities and relationships in the Indian Ocean

FRANCOIS VREŸ AND MARK BLAINE

Introduction

This chapter outlines South Africa's Indian Ocean priorities and the relationships it holds to give expression to its selected interests. It commences by setting out South Africa's middle power status and how this role positions the country to interact with the international community. The next section covers South Africa's foreign policy priorities, focusing on the Indian Ocean. The third part describes the country's active involvement in promoting maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

South Africa upholds a declared policy of multilateral cooperation to promote its national interests and to respond to threats. The country's foreign policy outlook remains closely tied to the African agenda. This implies a direct interest in responding to events in and around Africa and thus in the western Indian Ocean and particularly the southwestern Indian Ocean. Regarding maritime security in the larger Indian Ocean waterscape, South Africa maintains a cooperative policy, demonstrated via its membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the India-Brazil-South Africa forum (IBSA). In addition, its Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) membership exemplifies South Africa's preferences for multilateralism. With regard to big power competition in the Indian Ocean, South Africa maintains membership

of multilateral platforms to influence developments. First, its membership of IORA and IBSA offer pathways to cooperate with multiple Indian Ocean Rim countries to mitigate escalation. Second, as a member of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping, South Africa has a voice to influence events between China and India as two growing competitors in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The latter outlook is also subject to the current state of affairs in South Africa with its elements of soft and hard power in decline and leaving South Africa few options other than that of multilateral cooperation, conflict prevention and peaceful conflict resolution.

South Africa as a middle power

Different views exist of South Africa as an emergent or a middle power alongside countries such as Norway, Sweden, Canada and Australia to influence international decisions on global matters. One common strand in the literature points to the aspirational and symbolic side of the country's positioning, and how South Africa neglected opportunities to play a greater constructive role in the tiered international system. Some argue that South Africa should be considered an emerging power, which would imply that other actors in the international system perceive South Africa as a future big power, rather than a middle power playing its role in a lower tier. A reputation as an emergent power would confer more status and prestige, but would also bring more responsibilities and requires political and economic clout to demonstrate the attributed status.[1] In an analysis of South Africa as an emergent power, Schoeman argues that South Africa is backsliding on its initial positive image due to a weakening of its democratic stance and substance, waning military power to back its diplomacy, a sluggish economy, and a diplomatic corps unfamiliar with playing a supporting role to advance South Africa's interests as a credible and active emergent power.[2]

Since 1994, South Africa has striven to reposition itself in the international system as an example of a nation overcoming internal strife and a possible civil war to emerge as a stabilising and reforming influence on the international order. This outlook ties in with the idea of a middle power that aspires to influence events and decisions about the functioning of the system, but is unlikely to do so single-handedly.[3] South Africa aspires to the category of an emergent middle power with the following roles ascribed to this position: policy entrepreneur, diplomatic broker, multilateral manager, and mediator with those of regional leader and champion of the South, particularly attributed to emergent middle powers.[4]

Although South Africa may perceive itself as an emergent middle power, its role is best viewed through the lenses of multilateralism, coalition building and a regional leader in southern Africa. South Africa also pursues niche diplomacy in a wider field

by supporting or opposing decisions according to its own world outlook.[5] It is in its attitudes towards hegemony in the international system that South Africa perhaps deviates most from the middle power norm of changing hegemony in the system in a reformist way. In this regard, Eduard Jordaan labels South Africa's approach as third worldly, solidarist, and even revisionist as opposed to reformist.[6] This shift does not imply being revisionist in all aspects, but South Africa is increasingly perceived as deviating from the common view of middle powers as constructive and reformist actors in the international system. But in practice, South Africa's aspiration to play the middle power role is doubtful and the literature increasingly questions whether it can in fact play this role beyond the scope of its Africa agenda. While South Africa declared its role to be reformist, more recent critique labels its actions in some cases as more revisionist although this is not the case regarding its actions towards the Indian Ocean where it toes the reformist line.

Overall, at times South Africa acts as an emergent power, and as an emergent middle power. Over the longer term, South Africa has not always played a constructive role and its initial standing and the soft power gained after 1994 is eroding, which casts doubt on whether it can mobilise the required hard (military) and soft (economic, diplomatic and leadership) power to move beyond popular labels, attributions and claims as an emergent or even an active and credible middle power. Subsequently, and in the world of hard politics, economic and military realities, South Africa's role as an emerging or even second-tier power could well be found wanting, if not severely limited.

On a different track, South Africa can become more influential through its BRICS membership.[7] Several of the incumbent BRICS members (China, India, Russia, and South Africa) already hold definite Indian Ocean interests. In addition, the 2023 BRICS enlargement included countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates with vested interests in maritime security of the Indian Ocean. This development places South Africa within a group holding substantial interests in, and ambitions to exercise more influence, over events in the Indian Ocean.[8] By 2024 naval exercises involving Russia, China, Iran, India and South Africa reflected the maritime face of BRICS in the Indian Ocean although these exercises are not underpinned by any formal BRICS security or military agreements. Finally, BRICS appears to be slowly raising its maritime agenda, where the Indian Ocean will likely be a significant focus in connecting economic power, development, and the Blue Economy to individual or collective maritime agendas.[9] This shift became reinforced after the 2024 BRICS Summit that admitted Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam as partner countries.[10]

South Africa's foreign policy objectives and the Indian Ocean

South Africa is located at the southern tip of Africa and surrounded by three oceans: to the west, the country borders the southern Atlantic Ocean; to the south, the Southern Ocean links the country's eastern seaboard to the southwestern Indian Ocean. With a 2,800-kilometre coastline stretching from Namibia in the west to Mozambique in the east, three of the country's five largest harbours (Durban, Port Elizabeth, and Richards Bay) are located on the Indian Ocean. As such, South Africa has a direct interest in what transpires in the Indian Ocean and how it affects the country's maritime interests, which are largely embedded in economic matters, and safeguarding its interests against threats and undue vulnerabilities. Many vessels dock in South African ports, and a general estimate is that 80 per cent of South Africa's trade is sea-based. According to its National Ports Authority, approximately 1,670 ocean-going vessels dock annually in South Africa's five main ports. These numbers and the importance of South African ports assumed new meaning after shipping companies began diverting their vessels along the Cape Sea route since November 2023. This resulted from the Yemen-based Houthi rebel movement's armed attacks on commercial shipping along the Red Sea route. The Houthi attacks severely disrupted a major international shipping lane to and from the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific.[11]

Connecting South Africa's interests to the Indian Ocean involves explicit and implicit perspectives. Explicitly, South Africa's foreign policy goals as depicted in the Strategic Plan of its Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) include commitments to foster cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Implicitly and perhaps more subjectively, one can infer from South Africa's involvement in Indian Ocean matters that the ocean off its eastern seaboard receives more national attention than the Atlantic to the west. Current security, economic and diplomatic developments in the Indian Ocean are more salient and show a more visible South African connection than the Atlantic seaboard. South Africa also holds membership of more fora and agreements pertaining to the unfolding politico-security and economic dynamics of the Indian Ocean through its many littoral states – most of which are politically aligned with the Global South. Overall, security events in the Indian Ocean and in the western Indian Ocean in particular have drawn South Africa into the dynamics of this ocean environment.

As a state explicitly identifying with Africa, South Africa's outlook on security, international relations and how the international system functions are inherently directed by its own experiences and how it forged its position after 1994 under an African National Congress (ANC) government. In a Green Paper on foreign policy appearing directly after 1994, South African decisionmakers already intimated

that the country should prioritise African matters, non-alignment, participation in multilateral fora, and influencing world events in a positive way as its preferred national interests to direct policymaking.[12]

Multilateralism and bridge-building in the international system became strong features of South Africa's foreign policy after 1994. These two roles are underpinned by a strong anti-imperialist outlook that favours the Global South, and Africa in particular.[13] These remain two important pillars of South Africa's foreign policy outlook as the country projects these stances into most of its membership agendas in the international community (United Nations, African Union), formal fora (G20, IORA), and alternative fora such as IBSA and BRICS. These perspectives are reflected in its oceans outlook and interactions, emphasising that cooperation among all players – regardless of their political, economic, or power standing in the international system – is essential for promoting maritime security across all regions.

The earlier discussion on middle power status (whether attributed or emerging) finds some expression in South Africa's foreign policy documentation. DIRCO's Strategic Plan for 2020–2025 emphasises building a better South Africa, building a better Africa, and building a better world as priorities until 2025.[14] Overall, peace and security remain a primary objective in the country's foreign outlook, while one noticeable objective relates to the Indian Ocean through IORA, BRICS and IBSA with the G20 hosted by South Africa in 2024 probably offering more traction as eight of the member countries are also BRICS members or partners. IORA has a direct and sole Indian Ocean focus, BRICS brings four very important international players (India, China, South Africa, Iran) with stated interests and agendas in the Indian Ocean to the fore, while IBSA, alongside BRICS, links the South Atlantic to the Indian Ocean to ensure influence in a vast maritime environment of interest to the partner countries.

Although not explicitly stated, the maritime-related fora noted in the DIRCO strategic plan can hardly find full expression if it leaves the Indian Ocean aside. In this vein, the focus on IORA serves to underpin the importance of the Indian Ocean in South Africa's current foreign policy outlook and further emphasised with the country chairing IORA for 2017–2019. Including BRICS and a future BRICS+ after 2023 in viewing South African foreign policy holds a political, economic and diplomatic connection to the Indian Ocean through the interests of current and future members. In a declaratory sense, South Africa has committed to the BRICS agenda. At present, the BRICS connection to maritime interests and the Indian Ocean is somewhat tenuous, but became much more visible after the August 2023 announcement of six new BRICS members that includes Iran, United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia, a landlocked state in the Horn of Africa seeking an outlet to the Gulf of Aden.[15]

Given the DIRCO focus on regionalism and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in particular, Francis Kornegay explained this maritime nexus related to the Indian Ocean. The essence of his argument holds that the Indian Ocean is a maritime expanse at the centre of security involving many countries following the South-South agenda. In the broader IOR, there are 51 coastal and landlocked states, 26 island states, five Red Sea states, of which only one (Australia) does not fall within the official demarcation of the Global South.[16]

The Global South is a fluid label for countries that perceive themselves as marginalised in the international political and economic system, and broadly concur in their opposition to colonialism, racism and imperialism. Although often misunderstood as a geographic cluster of states, the grouping criteria are more about common stances on political, economic and social matters, and a solidarity to change the international structural system.[17] This solidarity featured as an underlying sentiment during South Africa's tenure as Chair of IORA (2017–2019). For its period as chair, South Africa's Foreign Minister prioritised maritime security and safety, improving resilience, sustainable and responsible fisheries, and promoting the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, although IORA covers multiple maritime sectors including trade, tourism, climate, environment, gender, safety, rescue services and development of the Blue Economy.[18]

The Indian Ocean also offers an arena for maritime contact between South Africa, Brazil, India, Iran and China. Important sectors underpinning cooperation include maritime trade, commerce, and security cooperation, and flow of ideas, shipping, and information.[19] In the maritime realm, South Africa's geographic position links Brazil to the other BRICS members by way of the Indian Ocean. This maritime link also plays out in DIRCO's focus on IBSA and its maritime and naval underpinnings. Together with IORA, these maritime-based connections highlight South Africa's interest in and participation in Indian Ocean matters and institutions.

Although some BRICS member states (India and China in particular) also have competitive relationships, the overall economic agenda is the stronger driving force, with a lesser link to Indian Ocean affairs. For the moment, power and competition are not in the foreground of this grouping's overall agenda of cooperation, solidarity and changing the global economic status quo. Furthermore, China and India do not serve on the main body concerned with Indian Ocean matters. While South Africa and India both hold IORA membership, China is only a dialogue partner, which somewhat sidelines the China-India rivalry.

Overall, South Africa's priorities and partnerships in the IOR feature visibly in its foreign policy strategy, membership of Indian Ocean fora and higher-order groupings such as BRICS that overlap with the Indian Ocean as a maritime environment. Institutionally and in a normative way, one can trace South Africa's priorities to

institutional membership and partnerships in the Indian Ocean. Inherently, South Africa's official policy is and remains to cooperate with multilateral institutions to effect change or resolve disputes and offset dominant players in a peaceful manner to avoid confrontation.

One example of peaceful dispute settlement is the Chagos – Diego Garcia case between the United Kingdom and Mauritius that is moving towards settlement. This is an important matter as the islands are located in the Western Indian Ocean, involves Mauritius as an independent state and member of SADC. From a South African foreign policy perspective, it is seen as a step towards removing a colonial vestige on African territory, promoting territorial sovereignty under Mauritian rule and possibly also lowering big power competition for another foothold in the surrounding ocean territories. Overall, the Chagos settlement resonates with South Africa's foreign policy on peaceful resolution of disputes and its anti-imperialist stance. In itself, South Africa played no real diplomatic role to encourage a settlement but has a regional security and solidarity interest in the conflict prevention value of the settlement in the western Indian Ocean.[20]

One can glean from its declared stances and actions that South Africa stands with its Southern partners, but potential for cooperation with the United States or France in the Indian Ocean rests upon pragmatism and the case at hand. This stance is also visible in its Foreign Policy Strategy, which indicates that South Africa will enter into what it calls 'Special Relations' with countries such as France and the US, when necessary and largely to uphold economic relations. In essence, South Africa's principled stance is anti-imperialist, pro-Africa and anti-West, with pragmatism playing out when economic relations come into play. This latter stance played out most visibly in South Africa's high-level delegation to the United States in 2023 to convince the US administration not to exclude South Africa from the African Growth and Opportunity Agreement given the country's perceived pro-Russia stance in the Russia-Ukraine War.[21]

However, research on South Africa as an emergent power or a possible emergent middle power casts some doubt on the country's political, economic, diplomatic and military influence at play in either of these tiers. This uncertainty is real and must be kept in mind as the discussion below turns to the operational side of South Africa's activities and contributions to maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

South Africa and maritime security in the Indian Ocean

To understand South African involvement in the Indian Ocean, one should first highlight its context and mandate from a continental and regional perspective. At the continental level, the African Union (AU) should provide direction, while the SADC has a similar role at a regional level. Both levels play a role, given South Africa's

overall prioritisation of Africa and the SADC in its national interests and foreign policy outlooks, which have been taken up as the country's foreign policy priorities and strategy for 2020–2025.

Continental direction

Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 (AIMS 2050), adopted by the AU in 2012, highlights the economic potential of Africa's maritime domain and decrees that all member states have common maritime challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities for implementing a common strategy. The strategy provides a framework for the protection and sustainable exploitation of the maritime domain.[22] AIMS 2050 can be seen as an integral component of Africa's maritime security infrastructure and part of an effort towards developing a more coherent African maritime security community under the strategic leadership of the AU. It situates maritime security at the continental level, while attempting to strengthen international, continental and regional maritime cooperation.[23] But, in practice, maritime security continues to play a secondary role where security on the continent is involved. This could be seen in the fact that many of the maritime security posts at AU level remain vacant. Further, the AU Office of Maritime Affairs has not been active in seeking and delineating its rightful role in the security milieu.[24]

On assuming the chair of IORA in October 2017, South Africa also confirmed its commitment to AIMS 2050 when it indicated that it would actively seek to align the activities of IORA to AIMS 2050 in areas of maritime security, capacity building, skills development and technology transfer in the ocean economy.[25]

Regional direction

The Standing Maritime Committee of SADC, with seven member countries bordering or located in the western Indian Ocean, was established in March 1995 with the aim of promoting peace and prosperity in the region through maritime military cooperation. Its specific objectives include the provision of mutual maritime security to protect sea lines of communication, the development of maritime capability and capacity, and the development of a credible maritime response.[26] This was demonstrated when the committee was tasked with leading the review of the SADC maritime security strategy, signed in 2011. A new SADC integrated maritime security strategy was developed by August 2019, and was reportedly signed by heads of state in March 2021. This new strategy is seen as an improvement, as it moved away from the narrow anti-piracy focus of the previous document.[27] In addition, southern Africa has a regional consensus on maritime security that ties into continental calls

(AIMS 2050 and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want) for maritime security and protection of the oceans.

South Africa and IORA

IORA membership reflects South Africa's political preference for multilateral fora to influence decisions about global matters, and aligns with its perceived second-tier status, using multilateral fora to advance its views in the international system. South Africa was a founding member of IORA in 1997, and when it chaired IORA from 2017 to 2019, it explicitly placed maritime safety and security, and sustainable development at the apex of its agenda.

Overall, South Africa used the opportunity to engage with the 23 member states and nine dialogue partners on maritime safety and security under the banner of "uniting the peoples of Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Middle East through enhanced co-operation for peace, stability and sustainable development".[28] During its term, South Africa had the opportunity to bring forward its own values and interests by advocating for more openness, institutional reform, as well as better cooperation and collaboration to enhance IOR maritime safety and security. These actions, in turn, promoted the Indian Ocean as a region of peace, stability and development within which to pursue the goal of promoting (economic) co-operation for the wellbeing and development of the countries and peoples of the Indian Ocean Rim.[29] Given that South Africa lacks significant hard maritime power to project and influence events in the Indian Ocean, IORA is probably the best vehicle available for it to implement its policy and pursue national interests.

South Africa, the Djibouti Code of Conduct and the Jeddah Amendment (DCoC/JA)

In addition to IORA, South Africa also uses its membership of other fora to play a more constructive role in advancing maritime security and related matters, focussing on the western Indian Ocean. One such forum is its membership of the 20-member DCoC/JA, which aims to counter maritime crime. By virtue of being a signatory to the DCoC/JA, South Africa commits to international cooperation to counter maritime crime in the western Indian Ocean. The DCoC/JA is unique in that it is a multilateral institution comprising states and international organisations (the International Maritime Organisation and the United Nations Organisation on Drugs and Crime) in helping to provide the means to ensure comprehensive legal processes – from legislation, to arrest, and incarceration – in prosecuting maritime crimes in this region, which stretches from Egypt in the north to South Africa in the south, and includes countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.[30] This

membership demonstrates South Africa's preference for multilateral cooperation and partnerships with countries of the Global South to advance maritime security in the IOR. Through the DCoC/JA, South Africa demonstrates its relevance by helping to police the southwestern Indian Ocean off SADC. This participation gives expression to its declared policy of upholding the rule of law through cooperation with fellow African governments and multilateral institutions.

South African naval responses to maritime threats in the IOR

After two attempted piracy incidents off the coast of Mozambique in 2010,[31] South Africa initiated the process of developing the initial SADC Maritime Security Strategy that SADC's Organ on Politics, Defence and Security endorsed on 14 June 2011. The document, "The SADC Maritime Security Strategy to Counter Maritime Insecurity in SADC's Indian Ocean Region," underlines the focus of eliminating maritime insecurity (mainly maritime piracy) in SADC's IOR.[32] The endorsement of the strategy document led to a trilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) on maritime security cooperation between South Africa, Mozambique and Tanzania, signed on 13 December 2011.[33] This MoU was superseded by a bilateral MoU between South Africa and Mozambique in 2012,[34] which led to the formation of a SADC maritime taskforce to conduct anti-piracy operations (Operation COPPER), focusing almost exclusively on anti-piracy operations in the waters of Mozambique and Tanzania.[35]

Operation COPPER

Operation COPPER offered South Africa an opportunity to participate in anti-piracy operations in a regional context, aligning with an emphasis on regional cooperation in its foreign policy. This cooperation ensured the operation would theoretically be a SADC-based initiative consistent with the African Agenda, ultimately ensuring collective responsibility for maritime security.[36] The first deployment to the Mozambique Channel for Operation COPPER took place in 2011 using South African Navy frigates. A detachment of the Maritime Reaction Squadron, as well as maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters of the South African Air Force, supported the operation. The forces initially operated from a forward operating base in Pemba, Mozambique until 2015, when the forward operating base concept was scrapped. From 2015, forces operated directly from South African Navy platforms, while the South African Air Force continued maritime patrols from South African territories.[37] From 2014, primarily due to operating cost reductions, Operation COPPER maritime patrols fell mostly to offshore patrol vessels, assisted by the combat support vessel, SAS *Drakensberg*, as well as the hydrographic survey vessel, SAS *Protea*.[38] While South Africa provides platforms for the deployments, Mozambique provides

personnel for boarding operations. The deployments also provide the opportunity for capacity building and training for the respective maritime forces.[39]

Although the primary purpose of Operation COPPER was to combat maritime piracy in the Mozambique Channel, the operation improved maritime security more generally by curtailing illegal fishing, trafficking and other maritime insecurities. The mandate for Operation COPPER is extended annually, while the cost of the operation is proving problematic due to South Africa's declining defence budget.[40] As a deterrent, Operation COPPER was highly effective in enhancing security in the southwestern Indian Ocean, with no piracy activities registered over the last few years. The operation also interacted with the European Union Naval Force (NAVFOR) in 2012, when it prevented a suspected pirate vessel from escaping EU hot pursuit.[41]

The SA Navy attempted to redirect its Operation COPPER mandate to support the SADC taskforce with its mission in Mozambique, combating the growing insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region. This SADC mission has recently been terminated, resulting in all SADC forces being withdrawn in 2024. This left the Rwanda Defence Force and a small Tanzanian contingent to continue the support to the Mozambican Defence force to safeguard the region.[42] A traditional and active smuggling route (also known as the 'Hash Trail') runs down the western Indian Ocean, with northern Mozambique a known landing point for smuggled goods and people. This area is thus a potential route of convenience for the insurgents in Cabo Delgado, considering their stated affiliation with extremist groups further north. The SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) was deployed in July 2021 as a regional response to support the Republic of Mozambique to combat terrorism and acts of violent extremism in the northern Cabo Delgado province.[43] As part of SAMIM, the South African Navy contributed two offshore patrol vessels from July to November 2021, and one frigate from March to May 2022.[44] Tanzania provided one patrol vessel, while Mozambique provided patrol boats, including one donated by the US in December 2022.[45] Whether a permanent or intermittent naval presence is on the cards remains to be seen, as such a naval deployment is expensive and must compete against severe defence budget cuts.

Maritime border safeguarding

Maritime border safeguarding is conducted by the South African National Defence Force under the auspices of Operation CORONA, which plans and conducts land, sea, and air border-line safeguarding. This is operationalised through ad hoc deployments of naval and air assets supported by intelligence, or maritime domain awareness (MDA) activities. Operation CORONA also authorises the ad hoc deployment of maritime surface and air assets into the adjacent waters of

Mozambique during approved multinational operations to extend deterrence beyond South African waters while enhancing MDA.[46]

Search and rescue

South Africa is assigned responsibility by the International Civil Aviation Organisation and International Maritime Organization (IMO) for the coordination of search and rescue in an adjacent area of approximately 17.2 million square kilometres,[47] covering a large area of the southern Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean down to Antarctica. A 2007 multilateral agreement between South Africa, Madagascar, Comoros, and Mozambique provides for search and rescue cooperation in areas adjacent to the coast.[48] The main Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre is in Cape Town, with sub-centres in Walvis Bay, Durban, Dar es Salaam and Seychelles.[49]

Hydrography

One of the most effective areas of regional leadership by South Africa in the maritime realm has been in hydrography. The country's naval directorate of hydrography is responsible (through its membership of the IMO and the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO)) for navigational charts, hydrographic services, and coastal navigation warnings.[50] As a member of the IHO since 1951, the South African Navy's Hydrographic Office has been tasked with the charting of Region H (South Africa), contributing to charting for Region M (Antarctica) and coordination of Navarea VII maritime safety information. Region H covers a large portion of the southern Indian Ocean and includes the areas around the majority of the island states off the east coast of Africa.[51] South Africa drew up a Hydrographic Cooperation Plan for the Standing Maritime Committee of SADC, which is currently in force, and urged member states to apply for membership of the IHO.[52] The Southern Africa and Islands Hydrographic Commission was established in 1996, with SADC countries becoming full or associate members. The aim of the commission is to improve hydrography in the region with a focus on capacity building.[53]

Exercises and symposia

The exercise INTEROP EAST is scheduled to be held annually along the east coast of Africa , but does not takes place regularly due to budget constraints. It was initiated by South Africa with all SADC member states encouraged, through the Standing Maritime Committee, to participate in the capacity-building exercises. The exercise focuses on search and rescue, ship safety exercises, seamanship and joint and multilateral cooperation. Exercise OXIDE between South Africa and France was initiated in 2011 and takes place biennially to test maritime interoperability and

combat readiness. The exercise takes place in the waters off South Africa and Réunion in the Indian Ocean on a rotational basis.[54] The South African Navy biennially participates in Exercise IBSAMAR (India, Brazil and South Africa) with the latest iteration taking place during October 2024. While the exercise is mainly planned for South African waters, the 2016 iteration took place in India. The aim and objectives of the exercise include improving interoperability, enhancing readiness, developing doctrine, tactics, and operating procedures, and enhancing military and diplomatic understanding and cooperation among the navies of the participating nations.[55]

South Africa hosted the inaugural exercise MOSI with China and Russia in November 2019, which many saw as a 'BRICS-light' exercise. The exercise coincided with the first visit and landing in South Africa of two Russian Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack bombers. Their capacity to carry nuclear weapons raised concerns. Although the exercise focused on 'low-hanging fruit' such as anti-piracy and disaster relief exercises, many analysts saw the exercise as a coincidence (the ships were in African waters anyway, merely using the opportunity to engage). The exercise is more about expanding Chinese and Russian interests in Africa, and not necessarily focused on South Africa.[56] The fact that India did not participate in the same naval exercise, even though it was unofficially under the 'BRICS' banner, was probably a diplomatic way to balance India's opposing views or rivalry on security and influence in the Indian Ocean. Under controversial circumstances and international scrutiny, Exercise MOSI 2 between China, Russia, and South Africa, was repeated in 2023 amidst the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and this time in the southwestern Indian Ocean off South Africa's harbour at Richards Bay.[57]

Conclusion

The Indian Ocean currently features more visibly in South Africa's foreign policy strategy than the Atlantic and Southern Ocean. From certain quarters, South Africa is also viewed as a 'swing state', capable of influencing decisions about Indian Ocean matters. However, this attributed status of being an emergent or even second-tier power finds little expression in how South Africa in fact plays this role. This uncertainty is reinforced by the country's economic woes and significant decline in its defence budget and the consequent decline in its capabilities to operate at sea. Both areas of decline cast doubt on South Africa's credibility as an emergent or second-tier power.

South Africa is but one player in the sizeable number of actors operating in the Indian Ocean, as displayed in the large membership of IORA (23 members and nine dialogue partners). Participation in IORA nonetheless demonstrates South Africa's stated preference for multilateral fora to influence African and global rules and practices. South Africa calls this an independent foreign policy, meaning the

relationships with other actors or fora could be tweaked as the situation dictates. Turning to priorities in the Indian Ocean, the western Indian Ocean's proximity to Africa probably remains South Africa's priority as it resonates with the country's Africa first focus in its foreign policy strategy until 2025.

Some perceived misalignments also feature in how South Africa forges partnerships and memberships and its Indian Ocean commitments. Membership of BRICS brings India and China's competition in the Indian Ocean into vogue, with India viewing itself as the main security player and China as the 'intruder'. This is a dilemma for South Africa, but cooperation with both China and India continues, although not concurrently as it appears that India and China are never grouped as participants in the same maritime exercise. In addition, a post-2023 BRICS++ membership including more Indian Ocean coastal states holds the potential to reinforce South Africa's foreign policy ambitions. South Africa can be more influential within an enlarged grouping of states from the Global South harbouring ambitions that resonate with the country's solidarity-based policy agenda.

IORA and IBSA depict two long-standing opportunities for maritime cooperation and naval collaboration between India and South Africa, but exclude China. While the South African Navy did cooperate with China and Russia in 2019 and 2023 during Operation MOSI, it was not a BRICS exercise as it is often alluded to, as the BRICS agreement does not cater for any military cooperation.

Diplomatically, South Africa attempts to avoid power competition or entrapments by cooperating with India, China and Russia on naval matters, while avoiding alienating any one partner. Overall, China is fast becoming Africa and South Africa's leading trade partner, but India has much closer ideological and liberation solidarity ties with South Africa. South Africa strives to uphold both these important symbolic and practical economic ties. Both relationships have respective strong constituencies and footholds within South Africa's domestic political and business elites, and it is reasonable to expect both to persist given their practical and ideological utility.

In conclusion, South Africa is actively involved in matters, institutions, and activities related to maritime security in the Indian Ocean. This involvement is visible in the general architecture to bring together actors located in the Indian Ocean Rim, or actors with an interest in this ocean. This activity underpins South Africa's declared interest in playing a role in enhancing and contributing to the Indian Ocean's security environment in a multilateral way. This optimistic view is, however, offset by a deficit between its declared commitments and its operational capabilities. A marked decline is evident in South Africa functioning as a middle power due to a rising vulnerability in the naval realm as the country's fast-declining defence spending is rapidly eroding its ability to use its navy to support its responsibilities in the western Indian Ocean, and even in SADC waters.

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12

Indonesia's ambivalence as an Indian Ocean power

PREMESHA SAHA AND NATALIE SAMBHI

Introduction

This chapter examines Indonesia's perspectives towards the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its future prospects as a maritime power or influential player in the region as its economic power grows. The chapter begins with an overview of Indonesia's domestic and foreign policy thinking about the maritime domain, before exploring the country's increasing interests in the Indian Ocean but nascent engagement with the region. It then looks at Indonesia's naval power and maritime partnerships, particularly in multilateral fora. Of late, Indonesia has deepened relations with India, a key player in the Indian Ocean, creating the potential for a critical mass of emerging powers. These states have growing economies and modernising militaries capable of shaping regional maritime security and norms.

Indonesia's potential is limited by real constraints. We conclude that Indonesia has a relatively credible claim as a player of influence in the IOR, however, it cannot yet assume a role as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean. While Indonesia has developed a greater maritime identity, including as an Indian Ocean littoral state, much of its maritime thinking continues to be shaped by domestic imperatives. Central to its influence in the Indian Ocean are its relationships with these states, based on historical connections to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), for instance, as well as its role in maritime diplomacy. However, Jakarta has had only limited success in translating this influence into regional policy gains. At present, Indonesia

is not capable of hard power projection in the IOR, particularly in terms of naval power. Many of its maritime defence priorities remain firmly around its archipelago, closer to the South China Sea and its eastern flank. If Indonesia one day desires to become an Indian Ocean maritime power, it must clearly define what kind of a power it wants to be, show intent in doing so, develop requisite capabilities for its defined role, and then demonstrate leadership as a security guarantor and norms developer.

Indian Ocean roles: maritime power or influential player?

In assessing Indonesia's potential role in the Indian Ocean, we consider whether it is – or is likely to become – a maritime power. That is, a maritime power, whether as a great or regional power, possessing strong maritime capabilities, especially a navy, able to control its maritime domain as well as exert influence upon other states. The prevailing IOR maritime powers are the United States, India, China, Australia and France. Other important yet prospective players include Russia.[1] These states are externally focused in their strategic orientation and demonstrate a clear intent to play a role in the IOR, as set out in respective key strategic documents[2] and their existing or planned naval bases.[3] All five also possess strong maritime capabilities, including navies with aircraft carriers or amphibious vessels, enabling power projection in the IOR. As G20 economies, these powers can sustain both hard and soft power presence in the IOR.

On the other hand, to be an important player in the IOR, Indonesia must demonstrate commitment to its partnerships and regional memberships, and be prepared to leverage its historical, cultural, economic and diplomatic influence. This includes its participation in fora such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Bali Process, while its sources of influence derive from its burgeoning economic growth and membership of the G20, historical ties with countries like India, and connections with NAM and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) members in the Indian Ocean.

Indonesian thinking about the maritime domain

Indonesia occupies a unique geostrategic position as the bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. With its vast archipelagic and large population of 278 million dispersed throughout, Indonesia's natural characteristics would suggest a long history of maritime thinking. However, Indonesia has not fully utilised its maritime geography in its foreign policy.[4] Since independence, the archipelago has been mostly inward-looking, having to deal with numerous internal security challenges such as insurgencies, separatist movements and terrorism, some of which continue. With this focus on land-based threats, Indonesia's strategic thinking and defence posture have been shaped predominantly by "land-based power with territorial command as

its main component".[5] This has reinforced the Army's historical dominance, limiting the roles of the Navy and the Air Force.[6] Where Indonesia does consider maritime matters, they are largely confined to areas near or within the archipelago, particularly since Indonesia sits astride four chokepoints between the Pacific and Indian Oceans: the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits.

The election of former President Joko Widodo (known popularly as 'Jokowi') in 2014 seemed to herald the end of Indonesia's relative neglect of its maritime domain, compared to land. Jokowi commenced his first term by outlining an ambitious vision of positioning Indonesia as the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) of the Indo-Pacific region, the primary theatre of Indonesia's foreign policy engagement. Officially announced at the 9th East Asia Summit in November 2014, the vision involved directing resources to the country's maritime infrastructure and promoting a regional maritime role, including in the Indian Ocean. When the GMF vision was first launched, some analysts argued that "Indonesia was starting to abandon its low-profile foreign and security policy; Indonesia was thought to be more outward-looking and even assertive in pursuing its strategic interests".[7] The vision also sought to modernise the country's maritime defence capabilities, enabling it to potentially play a more active role in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In 2015, Indonesian analyst and then ambassador Rizal Sukma stated that Indonesia would "no longer row between the two reefs, but will sail in the two oceans".[8] Sukma further noted that "ASEAN is important but it is not the only" focus of Jakarta's foreign policy.[9] In sum, these statements provided the policy framework for Indonesia to develop a more expansive orientation that envisaged an important Indo-Pacific role beyond ASEAN, and potentially more engagement with the Indian Ocean.

However, in practice, progress in expanding Indonesia's role as a maritime state has been achieved in mostly domestic policy areas, despite attempts to define GMF as a vision directing Indonesia to be more outwardly focused, as a "maritime state capable of contributing positively to the security and peace of the region and the world in accordance with the national interest".[10] In February 2017, the president issued Presidential Regulation no. 16 on Indonesian Ocean Policy (IOP), aimed at implementing parts of the GMF vision.[11] To achieve this, the IOP comprised two documents: the National Document on Indonesian Ocean Policy, containing a long-term framework, and the Plan of Action of the Indonesian Ocean Policy, a five-year action plan (2016–2019) detailing policy implementation.[12]

The seven main pillars of the IOP are: the management of marine resources and the development of human resources; defence, security, law enforcement, and safety at sea; ocean governance and institutions; economic and infrastructure of the marine sector and of prosperity enhancement; management of the ocean space and protection of the marine environment; maritime culture; and maritime diplomacy.[13]

However, among the seven pillars, progress has been made on just economic and infrastructure of the marine sector and of prosperity enhancement. Indonesian political scientist Shafiah Muhibat notes that though "in the domestic front, the policy document and the Plan of Action has a clear elaboration of the important aspects of ocean management, but the external dimension of the policy is still unclear, particularly in terms of how this policy will help interact with and affect regional geopolitics".[14] Former presidential advisor and foreign policy scholar, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, has pointed out, that "the IOP is primarily domestically oriented as most of the pillars and strategies are aimed at strengthening the protection and management of the Indonesian archipelago and maximising the economic potentials that its maritime domain has to offer as part of Indonesia's overall economic development".[15] While there were elements encouraging Indonesia to be more externally oriented, the GMF has ultimately been a vision aimed at making Indonesia an independent and self-sufficient economically developed country with a focus on domestic connectivity.

In February 2022, Regulation of the President of Republic of Indonesia no. 34 of 2022 concerning the Indonesian Marine Policy Action Plan 2021–2025 was passed. This Presidential Regulation provides for the formulation of a new Maritime Policy, considering that the Marine Policy Action Plan 2016–2019, as regulated in the Presidential Regulation no. 16 of 2017, needs to be continued and updated in an integrated and sustainable manner, through the implementation of various marine programs and activities according to the target of national development. The Action Plan concerns guidelines for ministries, government agencies and local governments and a reference for the community and business actors to carry out planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of marine development in application of Indonesia's vision.[16] The Regulation provides for monitoring, evaluation of implementation activity and Ministerial coordination. The attached Marine Policy Action Plan, in order to implement Indonesia maritime vision, defines the following goals: 1) sustainable management of marine resources; 2) developing the quality of human resources, knowledge and reliable marine technology; 3) building strong maritime defence and security system; 4) enforcement of sovereignty and national security in the sea; 5) implementation of good marine governance; 6) promotion of coastal communities and small islands welfare; 7) completion of regulations on marine spatial planning; 8) protection of marine environment. The Marine Policy Action Plan is based on the following principles: 1) archipelagic view; 2) sustainable development; 3) blue economy; 4) integrated management; 5) public participation. The Action Plan concerns general descriptions of the outcomes and achievements of the previous Action Plan; strategic issues and current conditions related to resource management, including fisheries management program, ecosystem approach, marine and fishing tourism, traditional and small-scale fisheries protection; strengthening

of marine security, in order to fight illegal fishing activities and eradicate illegal unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU); economic and industrial activities, including: energy security, increase the benefits and contribution of the marine tourism resources and creative economy, increase the independence of marine industries Infrastructure.[17]

Indonesia's contemporary interests in the Indian Ocean

In light of Indonesia's emerging maritime awareness, the country has several developing sets of interests in the Indian Ocean that provide greater impetus for bolstering maritime policies there. The first set relates to the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific overall, with Indonesia geo-strategically located within the region. There has been a renewed interest in middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region, which has led to growing mini-laterals with Indian Ocean countries such as India and Australia. Indonesia has usually counted itself "among the first wave of middle powers, based on both its capabilities and its hierarchical rank (between the great and small powers) and its foreign policy activism since the mid-1950s".[18] According to Anwar, Jokowi's GMF vision has been understood as "leveraging Indonesia's location at the intersection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into something greater than a mere physical presence". As such, the IOR provides diplomatic opportunities for Jakarta to play a role in shaping the region in ways that align with its broader strategic interests.

The second major set of interests are generated by the emergence of new centres of economic growth around the IOR, in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and eastern Africa. For Indonesia, this is a double-edged sword. With Jokowi's focus on maintaining Indonesia's economic growth, there are increasing opportunities with emerging economies like India. However, uneven growth and weak institutions have been accompanied by multiplying threats to regional security and, by extension, Indonesia's security. In particular, these include non-traditional security threats such as piracy in and around the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Malacca; illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; maritime-borne transnational crime; natural disasters and climate change.[19] Thus, Southeast Asian countries, particularly those which are also Indian Ocean littoral states, have been forced to pay increasing attention to the IOR, building ties with its major players as both economic and strategic partners. For instance, in May 2018, Indonesia and India upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which heralded a shared maritime vision that acknowledges the importance of addressing maritime-borne non-traditional security issues through bilateral or regional cooperation.[20] Similarly, Indonesia pledged with Australia to promote a rules-based regional architecture via IORA, among other multilateral fora, as part of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

signed in August 2018.[21] During Jokowi's visit to Australia in February 2020, Indonesia also agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation with Australia and through IORA.[22] Indonesia's newly elected President Prabowo Subianto visited Australia in August 2024 and the two countries concluded a defence agreement which includes provisions for joint drills and deployments to each country. Analysts have pointed out, "Prabowo is much more interested in international affairs. He will look to bring Indonesia into international issues. He's very confident, he's very knowledgeable, and he's very comfortable in international settings."[23] Some analysts have also reflected that 'boosting maritime cooperation will be a focal point in Prabowo's foreign policy.'[24] On the other hand, President Prabowo and Indian Prime Minister Modi held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in November 2024. The meeting discussed on strategic cooperation opportunities in health, education, and trade as well as strengthened bilateral relations between the two countries.[25]

The third set of Indonesia's IOR interests relates to increasing strategic competition due to the rise of China as a major maritime power in the IOR and India's increasing economic strength and influence in regional affairs. Indonesian strategic thinkers worry that the Indian Ocean might become a zone of major power competition, with an increased naval presence from China, France, India and Russia, alongside the longstanding US naval presence. Jakarta viewed the announcement of Australia's plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines as part of the trilateral security pact AUKUS as part of "the continuing arms race and power projection in the region".[26] Given Indonesia's proximity, there are apprehensions that it might become drawn into the middle of such competition. For instance, Anwar observes:

> It has also become evident that the rivalry between the major powers that has long characterized the Asia-Pacific landscape has also spilled over into the Indian Ocean region. Indonesia and other ASEAN member states have become increasingly concerned, in particular, with the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, which could jeopardize the long period of peace, stability and prosperity that the Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed.[27]

China's expansive and assertive foreign policy, as exemplified by its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its activities in the disputed South China Sea areas, among others, is perceived as a threat to the Indo-Pacific's rules-based order. Other Southeast Asian states have responded by increasing ties with regional powers. For instance, Vietnam and India have continued to strengthen their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, upgraded in 2016, seen by some analysts as a direct response to China.[28] In 2019, Singapore, Thailand and India held the first iteration of the

SITMEX naval exercise, which even took place this year, to ensure the security of shipping routes in the Andaman Sea and deepen interoperability.[29] The annual military exercise Garuda Shield, hosted by Indonesia and the US, was upgraded to Super Garuda Shield in 2022, with seven participating nations and 12 observing.[30] India and Indonesia has also been hosting the Samudra Shakti (bilateral naval exercise) and Garuda Shakti (exercise between the Indian and Indonesian armed forces) since 2018. India, Australia and Indonesia navies participated in a maiden trilateral Maritime Partnership Exercise in September 2023. during this exercise complex tactical and maneuvering exercises, cross-deck visits and cross-deck landings of integral helicopters were conducted for training of crew and enhancement of interoperability.[31]

China's repeated and increasingly aggressive incursions into the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around Indonesia's Natuna Islands have reinforced Jakarta's sense of vulnerability about its maritime domain. According to Joseph Chinyong Liow and Vibhanshu Shekhar, "An alarmed Indonesia has begun to deliberate how to create an adequate maritime defense infrastructure to ensure the security of its islands, maritime resources, territorial waters and exclusive economic zone."[32] As part of its 'free and active' diplomatic identity, Indonesia is concerned about strengthening the Indo-Pacific's regional architecture and rules-based order. However, China's incursions into the Natuna Seas, as well as its grey-zone operations in other parts of the South China Sea, tap into deeply embedded fears about sovereignty and territoriality, in ways that trump concerns about regional order.

That said, in spite of the risks for competition to escalate into conflict in the IOR, Indonesia maintains a stronger interest in the South China Sea. Officials in the former Jokowi administration remained fixated on the maritime region to the north, rather than west. Referring to China's new coast guard law, the then head of Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA), Vice Admiral Aan Kurnia, said "with China becoming more assertive South China Sea ... there is a risk of conflict escalation".[33] In contrast, the IOR is an area for Indonesia to exert influence while it concentrates its power for contingencies involving China, particularly around the Natuna Seas.

Development of Indonesia's Indian Ocean maritime policies

Though Indonesia had paid some attention to the Indian Ocean in the 1970s and 1980s, this was mostly due to the strategic rivalry there between the US and the Soviet Union, which was seen as having the potential to spill over into Southeast Asia. However, soon after the Cold War ended, the IOR seemed to have taken a backseat in the minds of Jakarta's policymakers. There have been some recent developments that have encouraged greater Indonesian engagement in the Indian Ocean Region,

including an increased focus on IUU fishing and the arrival of hundreds of Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar via maritime routes, particularly since 2017, continuing after the Myanmar military coup in February 2021.[34] After Jokowi's first term, however, the scorecard has been mixed.

Indian Ocean Rim Association

Indonesia assumed the role of chair of IORA from 2015 to 2017. As Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi commented, "Indonesia is determined to make the Indian Ocean a glue between Africa and the Pacific and to make IORA a regional architecture that fills a hollowness in the Indian Ocean in order to maintain global economic, security and stability." During its tenure, Jakarta pursued several important initiatives, including hosting IORA's first leaders' summit in March 2017. As Indonesian political scientist Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto has noted, Indonesia's four IORA initiatives have been largely diplomatic in nature.[35] These are the formulation of the IORA Concord (signed in March 2017 and known as the "Jakarta Concord"); the implementation of a one-time inaugural IORA Summit and Blue Economy Conference in 2017; the establishment of an Indian Ocean Business Innovation Centre; and a campaign for women's empowerment.[36] Also during the leaders' summit, IORA members adopted the Declaration on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, deemed by Foreign Minister Retno to evidence a "common commitment" against those threats by boosting cooperation through information sharing and dialogue.[37] That said, few initiatives and meetings focussed on maritime safety and security, the broader pillar under which terrorism and extremism are grouped, appear to have occurred between 2017 and the time of writing, and none appear to focus terrorism and extremism.[38]

Indonesia's vision of the Indo-Pacific

Indonesia was the main proponent in the development of the "Indo-Pacific Outlook" by ASEAN (AOIP). The Indonesian initiative was presented in a High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation hosted by Indonesia in March 2019, and is in line with Indonesia's vision of the GMF as well as ASEAN's Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality.[39] The Indonesian draft 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: towards a peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive region,' emphasised the principles of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for international laws, and ASEAN centrality. It proposed that cooperation be carried out through a two-pronged building-block approach: first, strengthening ASEAN-led mechanisms, particularly the East Asia Summit, and then connecting these mechanisms with other non-ASEAN regional mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region. It outlined three main objectives of the cooperation: to create an enabling environment for peace, stability,

and prosperity; to address security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional; and to promote economic cooperation. Three areas of concrete cooperation were put forward: maritime cooperation; infrastructure and connectivity; and sustainable development goals.[40]

Indonesia's steering of the AOIP reflected its discomfort that existing Indo-Pacific visions proposed by the US' Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy or China's Belt and Road Initiative, for example, would overshadow ASEAN's centrality. Given Indonesia's status of being the 'primus inter pares' in ASEAN, this initiative helped reinforce Indonesia's image in international fora as well as among the primary players in the Indo-Pacific like India, the US, Australia and Japan, who have long championed for the archipelagic nation to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific, including the Indian Ocean.[41] This effort would also allay the fears of fellow ASEAN member countries that ASEAN's importance in Indonesia's foreign policy calculus has now been diminished in importance given the broader Indo-Pacific has become the key area of interest for Indonesia. That said, the initiative was met with hesitation from some quarters within ASEAN, requiring Jakarta to push it through as an "outlook"[42] as opposed to policy, and Indonesia pushed for developments at the subsequent East Asia Summit with little success,[43] highlighting some of the limits of Indonesia's Southeast Asia influence. In September 2023, as chair of ASEAN, Indonesia also convened the inaugural ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum for Southeast Asian and partner states to discuss the implementation of the AOIP.[44] These steps demonstrate that Indonesia is not developing policies specific to the Indian Ocean, but instead considers it part of its overall Indo-Pacific vision.

The role of the Indonesian Navy in the Indian Ocean

Despite the country's growing interests, the Indonesian Navy's (TNI-AL) presence in the Indian Ocean has been limited. Its principal focus has long been on the seas in and around the Indonesian archipelago due to the prevalence of issues such as IUU fishing, piracy (particularly in the Celebes Sea), narcotics, refugees, and illegal labour smuggling. As a result of this operational history, Arif Muhammad and Kurniawan Yandere observe:

> Power projection capabilities beyond the national maritime jurisdictions, for instance, are not something that the TNI-AL has been familiar with. The TNI-AL strategy is essentially defensive in a sense that it does not adhere to the Mahanian concept of command of the sea, nor does it attempt to project naval assets beyond Indonesian waters. The institutionalised land force dominance has also hindered the ambition to expand Indonesian naval power.[45]

The Indonesian Navy's first (and only) major operation in the Indian Ocean since the 1960s was in 2011, to free the MV *Sinar Kudus*, an Indonesian-flagged ship hijacked by Somali pirates in March that year in the Gulf of Aden.[46] The operation involved two frigates, KRI *Abdul Halim Perdanakusuma-355* and KRI *Yos Sudarso-353*, a landing platform dock KRI *Banjarmasin-592*, a helicopter, and special forces.[47] While considered by one senior Indonesian naval officer as a "breakthrough", particularly for the Navy's image, such an operation has not been repeated. As highlighted by another TNI-AL officer, the MV *Sinar Kudus* incident "further demonstrated the continued need to build capacity in order to manage piracy and other maritime crises".[48]

Nevertheless, there has been modest growth in the Indonesian Navy's Indian Ocean activities over the last decade. Since 2014, under the previous Yudhoyono administration, Indonesia has conducted regular multilateral war games, including the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK).[49] Indonesia also conducts regular maritime search and rescue exercises in the Indian Ocean, such as the simulated evacuation of passengers from a downed aircraft by the National Search and Rescue Agency, BASARNAS,[50] in the waters off Aceh in 2017. Recently in November 2024, Indonesia and Singapore conducted a joint SAR exercise for aviation accidents in the border area of Natuna districts, Riau Islands.[51] In July 2023, the Indonesian and Indian navies conducted the 40th iteration of a coordinated patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) along the International Maritime Boundary Line, part of a growing bilateral maritime relationship including frequent port visits, exercises, and training exchanges.[52] The Navy also has conducted war games in the form of joint combat operations in the Indian Ocean in June 2014, including 23 warships and Sukhoi and F-16 fighter aircraft.[53]

There are also plans to expand and modernise the Indonesian Navy which, if implemented, could enhance its operational capabilities in the Indian Ocean. In 2002, the government issued a blueprint for the Navy 2004–2013 including multi-year planning to help the Navy "lock in" future budgetary commitments, key ideas of which were partially adopted in 2009 into the final version of the Navy's modernisation plans.[54] Another blueprint was issued in 2005 during the Yudhoyono presidency, which laid the plans for the Navy to become a "Green Water Navy" by 2024.[55] This blueprint then became part of President Yudhoyono's Minimum Essential Force (MEF) policy, formalised through the Presidential Regulation No.7 of 2008 on General Policy of State Defense, which established the MEF. The MEF blueprint incorporated two key institutional and operational drivers given the complex maritime security environment in which the TNI-AL operates: naval defence and maritime security.[56] The Green Water Navy, as stated in the MEF, would total 274 warships in 2024, consisting of 110 combat strike vessels (submarines, frigates, corvettes and fast attack craft), 66 patrol

boats, and 98 support vessels.[57] The Navy also proposed additional marines. Previously, the Navy was divided into two fleets, namely West and East. There are currently three fleets – West, Central, and East – with a force of around 70,000 personnel, although the distribution of resources between them is not even and favours the West.[58] The MEF, if it is achieved, will enable Indonesia to operate a Green Water Navy "primarily oriented towards operating in the EEZ while possessing a limited secondary ability to conduct 'out-of-area' operations".[59]

The modernisation targets of Yudhoyono's MEF endure today as part of the Jokowi administration's plans to upgrade the maritime forces. Indonesia continues to add patrol boats to the fleet and the Navy is also acquiring new ships to replace its ageing frigate fleet. The recent commissioning of the newest PKR frigate, the KRI *Raden Eddy Martadinata-331*, is an example.

There have also been some recent developments in the Navy's enduring physical presence in or near the Indian Ocean. The Navy opened the Nias Navy Base in northern Sumatra in 2013 as a part of maritime defence strategy planning (Renstrahan), as well as to address threats originating from the Indian Ocean.[60] Other naval bases on or near the Indian Ocean include Sabang naval base[61] and Simeulue naval base.[62] Both fall under Lantamal 1 (Main Naval Base 1) in Belawan). Lantamal 2 (Main Naval Base 2), located in Padang, covers Sibolga, Nias, Mentawai, and Bengkulu naval bases.[63] The enhanced facilities on the west coast of Sumatra or southern Java will potentially facilitate greater naval access to the Indian Ocean.[64]

Figure 1: The position of navy bases on the Indian Ocean coasts
Source: Authors and Google Earth

Despite these developments, recent initiatives such as deployments of naval vessels and fighter aircraft to the Natuna Islands, and upgrading its naval base there, highlight that Indonesia is focused on securing its sovereignty in the Natuna Sea.[65] These efforts are aimed at addressing potential traditional and non-traditional threats emanating from the South China Sea.[66] Therefore, it is safe to presume that the Indian Ocean will not be a focus for Indonesia in the near future. Thus it appears Indonesia's status as emerging as a maritime power in the Indian Ocean still has a long way to go.

Growing Indo-Pacific partnerships and diplomacy

Indonesia has shown strong interest in engaging the Indo-Pacific more broadly. The Indonesian Ocean Policy states, "Indonesia should continue to engage with all powers on both sides of the Indian and Pacific oceans and take full advantage of the economic opportunities that arise from competition between the major powers, adapting to the dynamics in the external environment while resisting domination."[67]

Consistent with this, Jakarta has signed comprehensive strategic partnerships with all the key players in the Indo-Pacific region, including China, India, Japan and the US. Of those states, India is a key Indian Ocean partner. The bilateral relationship with New Delhi has intensified, with exchanges of high-level visits by the two countries' top leaders and cooperation agreements over a broad range of areas. Of particular note is the joint Indonesian proposal for India to build a port and a hospital in Sabang on Indonesia's northernmost island in Aceh, close to the Andaman Sea. During his state visit to Indonesia in late May 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed a joint "Statement on shared vision on maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific between India and Indonesia," which reaffirmed the importance of achieving a free, open, transparent, rules-based, peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. In the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the various bilateral relationships between individual ASEAN member states and the other Indo-Pacific countries are regarded as important building blocks in the development of Indo-Pacific cooperation.[68] In 2018, India and Indonesia agreed to set up the India-Indonesia Infrastructure Forum (IIIF) to "foster collaboration between the private sectors of India and Indonesia" and "promote mutual benefit and explore opportunities for infrastructure development, including port projects".[69] Over a year ago, the Forum completed a joint feasibility study on the development of Sabang port. In 2018 there was a visit of the INS Sumitra, an Indian Navy Saryu-class patrol vessel in Sabang. The progress on the development of the Sabang port has however been sluggish barring the interest shown by the Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ). The project is estimated to cost over US$1billion and

the "actual investment requirements will be worked out once the company reaches an agreement with Indonesian authorities to develop the port".

As mentioned previously, Indonesia has also strengthened its relationship with Australia in recent years, with the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and related Plan of Action for 2020–2024, as well as the Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation, all of which help establish a common understanding of the Indo-Pacific as "peaceful, prosperous and resilient … region" based on international rules, norms, and open markets.[70] However, this again appears to be part of a broader strategy to build ties with major Indo-Pacific players, rather than emanating from a strong Indian Ocean consciousness.[71]

Otherwise, Jakarta has shown relatively little diplomatic interest in the Indian Ocean, despite strong historic bonds with a number of regional countries, including through the Bandung Conference, the NAM, and the OIC. In a speech in 2015, at the 60th Anniversary of the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference, Jokowi made what journalist Nithin Coca deemed to be "a bold call" [72] for reform of the global order, including the UN, in order to act on issues such as the plight of Palestinians.[73] While this initially showed potential, the call appears completely rhetorical, as there has been no follow-up.[74] Jokowi's goal has not been to win global appeal; in most multilateral platforms he has only highlighted issues such as the South China Sea crisis, or the repression of the Rohingya in Myanmar or attracting foreign investment for his infrastructure development plans. Jokowi's interest in global issues appears to be negligible and is, at times, mainly for public posturing. Therefore, given the Indian Ocean is only broadly figuring as part of Indo-Pacific diplomacy, it does not seem likely that Indian Ocean diplomacy will figure in talks delivered at the NAM.

Indonesia has only exerted limited diplomatic influence directly among Indian Ocean partners regarding the plight of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, a significant human security issue in the region. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, while it is indubitably sensitive to issues in the Islamic world, particularly Palestine, Indonesia's diplomatic track record on issues has been uneven, with limited progress on brokering talks between parties in Afghanistan and on pressing China on the treatment of Uighur populations.[75] Secondly, while humanitarian assistance has been important in Indonesian foreign policy, ASEAN solidarity is more so. Particularly since 2017, hundreds of Rohingya have sought asylum in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, often making the journey via sea from Indian Ocean countries such as Bangladesh, which currently hosts more than 860,000 refugees.[76] While not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, nor the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, Indonesia has offered safe haven for Rohingya, especially because local communities in places like Aceh have provided care and support.[77] Indonesia's goal is not to integrate these people into the country,

but rather to repatriate them to Myanmar or resettle them in third countries.[78] That said, in 2015, Jakarta and Canberra were "reluctant", despite pressure from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to convene an emergency meeting of the Bali Process, the forum they co-chair that deals with people smuggling, human trafficking, and transnational crime.[79] Another factor is Indonesia's desire for an inclusive dialogue involving Myanmar.[80] Indonesia has since been more willing to engage in follow-up talks under the Bali Process, particularly due to an influx of Rohingya refugees attempting entry into Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand in April and May 2020.[81] The Bali Process, rather than IORA or other international fora, could be an effective avenue for Indonesia to diplomatically broach the Rohingya's plight. First, aside from the obvious point that the Bali Process' focus is human trafficking, at least 12 of the 45 nation state members are IOR countries, including the transit and destination states for the refugees. Second, Myanmar is a member of the Bali Process, but not of IORA.

Explaining the relative ambivalence of the Indian Ocean in Indonesia's policy calculus

Part of Indonesia's reluctance to focus on the IOR can be understood in the context of its broader foreign policy, which is strongly influenced by its "free and active" character. This "free and active foreign policy" has two facets. The first is to ensure that security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity are maintained through active diplomacy with other states, and yet free from formal alliances and other entanglements. Second, to bring the focus of internal development to the economic front, as well as addressing issues of economic disparity within the state that cause insecurity. These objectives have tended to discourage Indonesia from playing a broader regional role beyond Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, Indonesian policymakers believe in the Mandala system, which emphasises four concentric circles of influence, in which ASEAN appears in the first and will continue to be a primary focus in Jakarta's foreign policy calculus. Even within Indonesian policy circles, a 'post-ASEAN' or 'beyond ASEAN' foreign policy orientation is expressly downplayed. Indonesia was active during its chairmanship of IORA and, as chair of ASEAN, strengthened cooperation between ASEAN and IORA.[82] However the continuation of its active involvement as a member beyond Jokowi remains to be seen.

Another explanation is the tenacity of Indonesia's land-centric thinking and domestic focus in foreign policy and strategic culture. According to Indonesian security analysts Evan Laksmana and Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, "(1) The Army-dominated foreign policy establishment deprioritized external maritime interests and (2) the infusion of the National Resilience (Ketahanan Nasional) concept

into the 'Archipelagic Outlook' (Wawasan Nusantara) doctrine as a regime maintenance tool further 'domesticated' what could have been a geopolitical outlook".[83] Another is the doctrine of "National Resilience", which asserts that national security does not depend on external alliances, but rather on strengthening of "internal resilience" on all aspects of national life.[84] "These authoritarian legacies put Indonesia's foreign policy on a path-dependent trajectory that even President Jokowi's GMF could not break."[85] Unlike most other countries, Indonesia has made few attempts to assess the changing regional and global security environment and factor them into defence planning.[86]

Conclusion

In spite of calls and promises to strengthen Indonesia's position through maritime diplomacy in IORA, as well as in the wider Indo-Pacific, foreign policy and maritime issues have not been prominently displayed or developed in Indonesia. Rather, the focus has remained mostly on domestic matters. Though primarily a maritime nation, Indonesia still lacks an overarching maritime policy and an Indian Ocean strategy. As a result, in the near future, Indonesia will be viewed as an influential power in the Indian Ocean by the other littorals, but highly unlikely as a maritime power with full naval capabilities or significant regional diplomatic clout. Currently it is Chinese advances in the Natuna Sea that are grabbing the attention of Jakarta's policymakers and defence planners. Therefore, naval modernisation plans and the addition of another fleet is being pursued, with the South China Sea threat in mind. The fact that Chinese advances could occur in the eastern Indian Ocean is not given much regard. Unless Indonesia becomes more concerned with this potential threat, the Indian Ocean is unlikely to gain priority in its maritime security and policy apparatus.

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13

The agency of Indian Ocean island states

DEREK MCDOUGALL AND PRADEEP TANEJA

A glance at a map of the Indian Ocean shows that the independent island states occupy strategically important locations. The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the extent to which these island countries can exert influence in the geopolitics of the region. Are these countries simply pawns of the great powers in the region, or do they wield their own influence? If they have some influence, what is the basis for that influence? The island states to be discussed are Sri Lanka and Maldives (both linked to South Asia), and Mauritius and Seychelles (both linked to Africa). Comoros and Madagascar, immediately offshore from southern and eastern Africa, will not be considered due to space constraints.

In the first part of the chapter, we review the key factors influencing the agency of the island states, covering economic and security dependence, domestic politics and geographical location. On the basis of geographical location (as indicated previously), we group Sri Lanka and Maldives together for this discussion, followed by Mauritius and Seychelles. After reviewing the key factors influencing agency, we turn to the major strategies these countries pursue to enhance their agency: bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging. We also consider participation in multilateralism as a complementary strategy.

We begin with an assumption that all systems consist of structures and agents, and regional and international systems are no exception. States within these systems are seldom able to choose the circumstances under which they are required to act, but they are not entirely powerless. They must, however, act under given conditions and power structures. While power structures are important, international agency of sovereign states, big or small, should not be underestimated. However, agency is

always limited and the relationship between structure and agency is dynamic as they "actively and continuously constitute and change each other".[1]

Our argument is that the four island countries possess agency, derived from the factors outlined in the previous paragraph. In relation to international strategies, one cannot definitively determine whether a particular strategy strengthens or contributes to agency. Balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging feature prominently, while multilateralism enhances agency by enabling smaller states to support one another. The degree of agency relates not just to factors affecting the island countries but is also influenced by the intensity of competition among the relevant major powers: the greater the competition, the more pressure there is on smaller powers to align with a major power.

This discussion focuses on the post-Cold War era. During the Cold War (late 1940s to late 1980s), international politics was intensely polarised, particularly between the United States and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, international politics even during that era was never just about the two "superpowers." China was an independent actor, initially in conflict with the US and later with the USSR in a more intense rivalry. Decolonisation was another dimension, as the island states discussed in this chapter gained independence from Britain during the Cold War: Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) in 1948, Maldives in 1965, Mauritius in 1968, and Seychelles in 1976. These states were part of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) but not prominent. The factors affecting these states' agency during the Cold War were shaped by a different configuration of major powers in the Indian Ocean. The US was the most prominent, the USSR was highly active (more so than post-1991 Russia), and India was significant, but less influential than it is today. China played a far less prominent role. Allowing for that different configuration of the major powers, one can still see continuities in terms of the relationships the four island states had with India and the US, if not so much with China. Russia, as indicated, is far less important than the USSR was. It would be misleading to exaggerate the degree of polarity prevailing in the Indian Ocean region during the Cold War. Island states had some flexibility but less than in the more fluid environment of the post-Cold War era. Since the focus in this chapter is on the post-Cold War period, we will not go beyond the general point that greater fluidity with the involvement of the major powers is a factor enhancing the agency of the small island states. There was some flexibility in the earlier period but not as much as in the post-Cold War era.

Factors contributing to the agency of the Indian Ocean island states

In an earlier article,[2] we identified economic and security dependence and the nature of domestic politics as the factors that affect the ability of small island states to exercise agency. Here, we add a third factor – geographical location – to examine how

these factors influence the four island states' agency in the context of growing Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Before proceeding further, however, it is worth elaborating, very briefly, on these factors. First, while no state can be expected to meet all its economic, development, and security needs on its own, over-reliance on any single external provider can circumscribe agency. Second, a more consensual domestic political environment generally provides greater leverage with major powers. In contrast, high levels of domestic political contestation reduce agency by enabling external powers to overtly or covertly influence the national policy agenda in pursuit of their own interests. Finally, geographical location, particularly proximity to a major power, brings with it its own challenges and opportunities. Sovereign states are supposed to have equal rights in the international system, but the leaders of smaller (and materially weaker) states understand that there is an informal hierarchy of states, in which they cannot advance their interests by going against the interests of larger and considerably more powerful neighbours. This problem is accentuated when smaller states have two major powers competing for influence on their home turf, but only one of them is a close neighbour.

Sri Lanka and Maldives

Sri Lanka and Maldives have long maintained economic ties with both China and India. While India used to enjoy an overwhelming advantage over China in trade ties with the two South Asian island states, the gap has narrowed considerably over the past decade. In 2011, for example, the value of two-way trade between India and Sri Lanka was double that of China-Sri Lanka bilateral trade; a decade later they were almost neck and neck. India had historically been Sri Lanka's largest source of imports. However, in 2016, for the first time, imports from China surpassed those from India. By 2018, China and India each held an equal share of Sri Lankan imports at about 18 per cent.[3]

Sri Lanka signed its first ever free trade agreement (FTA) with India in 1998, but does not yet have an FTA with China, despite launching negotiations in 2014. Notwithstanding the absence of an FTA, China's share of Sri Lankan imports had continued to rise since the early 2000s, while India's share had remained static or declined. In 2021, the total value of bilateral trade between China and Sri Lanka was US$5,971 million. Sri Lanka imported US$5,480 million worth of goods from China and its exports to China were valued at just US$491 million, with a net trade deficit of US$4,989 million.[4] Bilateral trade between Sri Lanka and India was valued at US$5,870 million in 2021, with Sri Lankan imports from India amounting to US$4,870 million and exports to India at US$1,000 million, resulting in a trade deficit of US$3,870 million.[5] As an export market, India is far more important to Sri

Lanka, as it exported twice as much to India than China in 2021. India's economic importance to Sri Lanka changed dramatically in early 2022, when Sri Lanka faced a serious economic crisis. Sri Lanka's merchandise imports contracted by US$2.35 billion in 2022 compared with 2021, with imports from China registering the sharpest fall as they decreased by US$1.37 billion. At the same time, Sri Lanka's imports from India increased as it imported more fertiliser, food and fuel from India. As Thilina Panduwawala points out, "this increased India's share of Sri Lanka's imports to 26 per cent in 2022, while China's share decreased to 18 per cent (or 19.4 per cent including Hong Kong)".[6]

As for Maldives, only India appears in its top 10 export destinations for 2021, the latest year for which trade figures were available, with Thailand being its number one market for exports. But China (US$323 million) and India (US$318 million) were the third and fourth largest sources of imports, respectively, for Maldives.[7]

While the trade relations of the two South Asian island states with China and India do not indicate high dependence on either, both have been targets of competitive loans, grants, and lines of credit from the two powers. This has polarised domestic public opinion and sparked international controversy. The first Trump administration accused China of predatory behaviour and using debt-trap diplomacy with developing countries, with Sri Lanka cited as the prime example.[8] When Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt repayments in early 2022, China failed to offer much relief, even as India provided more than US$4 billion in assistance to Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka and Maldives have long pursued an 'India-first' policy, which was reiterated by the then Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa following his election victory in November 2019. In August 2020, elaborating on the rationale for this policy, Jayanath Colombage, Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary from August 2020 to May 2022 and a retired admiral and former commander of the Sri Lankan Navy, said: "Because we cannot be, we should not be, we can't afford to be a strategic security threat for India, period."[9] In another interview, he said: "That means Sri Lanka will not do anything harmful to India's strategic security interests" and "Sri Lanka cannot afford, should not afford and will not afford any particular country to use it as a staging area to do anything against another country, especially so India."[10] These assurances notwithstanding, some Indian scholars were uncertain as to how Sri Lanka's India-first policy would reconcile with its then president's claims that his government would pursue a foreign policy of neutrality and equidistance from major powers.[11]

Ranil Wickremesinghe came to power in July 2022 amid tumultuous political developments that saw his predecessor, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, flee the country. Wickremesinghe made his first official visit to India as president in July 2023, where the two countries signed a series of energy, connectivity and trade agreements. As a

result of India's generous assistance to crisis-hit Sri Lanka, economic ties between the two countries have grown considerably over the past couple of years. China, on the other hand, has been slow to help with Sri Lanka's debt optimisation program. It is Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender. Wickremesinghe visited China in October 2023 to attend the third Belt and Road Forum and met with President Xi Jinping. Although there were no significant announcements during this visit, the Chinese leader promised to buy more Sri Lanka products and to increase investments. Xi also assured the Sri Lankan leader that China would provide "friendly, practical and timely support" for Sri Lanka's debt optimisation program.[12]

Several past Maldivian leaders have repeatedly asserted their commitment to an 'India-first' policy. This stance is reciprocated by India through its 'Neighbourhood-first' policy, where Maldives holds a "very special and central place", according to the then Indian Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla.[13]

Sri Lanka and Maldives have historically enjoyed stronger defence ties with India than with China, even if Sri Lanka has relied more heavily on defence imports from China, especially during the long civil war. For example, the former Foreign Secretary Colombage, mentioned above, graduated from the Defence Services Staff College of India. Many senior defence officials from both countries have trained in India. Since 2011, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives have also convened a meeting of their National Security Advisers on an irregular basis. A November 2020 meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave, as the forum is called since 2020, may have paved the way for the regularisation of this institutional mechanism by agreeing to establish a permanent secretariat in Colombo.[14] In February 2021, an agreement was reached between India and Maldives under which India will develop a new coast guard harbour for the Maldives National Defence Force. This was seen as further indication of closer defence ties between India and the South Asian island states.[15]

The nature of domestic politics is also an important factor that has a bearing on the ability of a small island state to exercise its agency in relation to larger powers. Both Sri Lanka and Maldives have highly competitive domestic politics, in which relations with major Asian powers can and often do become a point of contention between political parties. In the 2015 Sri Lankan presidential election campaign, for instance, the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa's close ties with China came under attack from his opponent, Maithripala Sirisena, who went on to win the election in a surprise result. Once in office, the Sirisena government set about repairing political and security ties with India and reassured India that Sri Lanka would not act against India's interests. Then, during the 2019 presidential election campaign, the Rajapaksa brothers, who had invited the Chinese government to finance and build the Hambantota port when they were first in power between 2005 and 2015, criticised the Sirisena government for handing over majority control over that port

to a Chinese company. As others have noted, foreign policy and foreign investment in Sri Lanka used to enjoy bipartisan support regardless of which party won the election. But in this era of intensifying competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean Region, they are par for the course in domestic politics and "strategic investments have become campaign fodder".[16]

Likewise, in Maldives, the former President Mohamed Nasheed was seen as too close to India by his political and military opponents; he was removed from office in 2012 in what amounted to a coup d'état. His successors, Mohammed Waheed Hassan (2012–2013) and Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018), developed close economic and political ties with China while claiming all along that the Maldives followed an 'India-first' policy. When Nasheed's party returned to power in 2018, with Ibrahim Mohamed Solih as President and Nasheed as the Parliamentary Speaker, the balance appeared to shift in India's favour.

However, the election of Mohamed Muizzu as the new President of Maldives in September 2023 appeared to have once again tipped the balance in China's favour. During the election campaign, he vowed to ask India to withdraw the 76 Indian military personnel based in Maldives. These personnel maintained helicopters and a Dornier aircraft for surveillance and medical evacuations. After his election victory, he repeated those demands and set a deadline of 10 May 2024 for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel. Referring to the Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean, he said: "Maldives is too small to get entangled with this global power struggle. We will not get entangled into this."[17] India acceded to this demand and replaced its military personnel with the employees of the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, thus allowing Muizzu to claim that he has fulfilled his campaign pledge.[18] Having first broken from tradition to visit China before India, Muizzu then attended the swearing-in ceremony of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi following the latter's third consecutive election victory in May 2024. He then paid a five-day state visit to India in early October 2024, during which India offered a generous package of assistance to Maldives and the two countries agreed to build a Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership.[19] It now appears that his tilt towards China was part of a political strategy to win power and his recent visit to India indicates a return to a more traditional India-first policy.

It is clear from these political ups and downs that the contentious domestic political culture not only drags major powers into the fray during elections, it also creates opportunities for these powers to influence policy outcomes. This in turn has a constraining effect on the agency of the island state in the face of major power competition in the region.

Finally, close geographical proximity of both Sri Lanka and Maldives to India has limits on how far they are able to exercise their agency on important regional

security issues that involve India. When India's vital security interests are at stake, it would be imprudent for the island states to step up security cooperation with China in a manner that would be seen by India as inimical to its interests. India, for its part, recognises the importance of these island states for its own economic and security interests and offers them as much economic and military assistance as it can afford – and they are willing to accept. The former Foreign Secretary of India, Shivshankar Menon, highlighted the strategic importance of Sri Lanka to India, when he wrote: "Sri Lanka is an aircraft carrier parked fourteen miles off the Indian coast."[20] India cannot afford for this aircraft carrier to belong to a hostile power, especially China. The newly elected Sri Lankan President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, a left-wing politician, would do well to remember those words.

Mauritius and Seychelles

The points about dependence, domestic politics and geographical location are also relevant with Mauritius and Seychelles as small island states in the southwest Indian Ocean, adjoining Africa.

Dependence can be a matter of perceptions, but there are also 'objective' circumstances that come into play. In terms of trade, both Mauritius and Seychelles have diverse links, thus minimising dependence and increasing agency. In relation to merchandise trade, China and India are both significant as sources of imports to Mauritius (first and third ranked respectively in 2023), but less so for Seychelles (China eighth and India ninth in 2022). In 2023, India was the ninth most important destination for exports from Mauritius (China not listed for that year by IMF); China is the 14th most significant export destination for Seychelles (Hong Kong is ninth; combining China mainland and Hong Kong would result in seventh ranking), with India not listed (2023).[21] In Mauritius's evolution from a dependence on sugar cane to become a hub for financial and ICT services, the links with India have been important; taking advantage of Mauritius's status as a tax haven, about a third of foreign direct investment in India in the period 2000-2015 came via Mauritius;[22] India and Mauritius signed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement in February 2021 as a means of consolidating trade and other economic ties;[23] In 2023, trade in services contributed 37 per cent of the Mauritian GDP,[24] much of this trade being with India. China has also seen advantages in using Mauritius as a platform for expanding its economic activities in Africa;[25] a China-Mauritius FTA took effect in January 2021.[26]

In relation to security dependence, perceptions are even more important, overlapping with strategic culture as it affects the choice of strategies (see below). In the case of Mauritius there is a perception of dependence on India, while also wanting

to avoid "control" by India. Beyond perception, Indian involvement in Mauritian security affairs is evident. The national security adviser in Mauritius is a senior Indian officer, and the head of the Mauritius Coast Guard is a serving Indian naval officer. Under a 2015 agreement, India has constructed a significant facility on the Mauritian-owned North Agalega island, about 1,100 kilometres north of Mauritius that includes an airfield, port facilities and intelligence-gathering capabilities. This will considerably enhance India's strategic reach in the ocean.[27] With Seychelles there are positive relations with India, while also a perception of an ability to "play the field", and avoid excessive dependence on one country. Significant in this respect is that the Seychelles government elected in 2020 has blocked development of Indian military facilities on Seychelles-owned Assumption Island.[28]

If a high level of consensus in domestic politics enhances agency, then both Mauritius and Seychelles are at an advantage. Both countries have multiparty systems, but their political systems have features that reduce polarisation and encourage cooperation. This means that in relation to external powers, the strategy of 'divide and rule' is less effective than would be the case if there were significant domestic political conflict. While Mauritius has communal divisions, its political parties are related to, but not synonymous with, those divisions. Political differences tend to be ones of emphasis, with political competition focusing on personalities. Since independence, the surname of the prime minister has for the most part been either Ramgoolam or Jugnauth (father and son in both cases).[29] The Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MSM), the leading party in the Mauritian Alliance, won the elections under Pravind Jugnauth in November 2019; in the elections of November 2024 the opposition coalition (Alliance of Change) under Navin Ramgoolam (Labour Party) won all 60 constituency-based seats on the island of Mauritius in a landslide result.[30] Each electorate has three members elected through a 'first past the post' system, with coalitions normally necessary to achieve the required majority in the legislature (a Westminster system).

Seychelles has an executive presidency, with the president elected separately from the legislature (the National Assembly). Cabinet members are nominated by the president but require legislative approval. Cabinet members cannot simultaneously serve in the legislature, similar to the US system. Following independence in June 1976 and then a coup orchestrated by the leftist Seychelles Progressive People's Front (SPPF) under France-Albert René in June 1977, Seychelles was a one-party system from 1977 to 1991.[31] In the context of the transition to democracy in 1991 to 1993 the SPPF remained the dominant party (known as Parti Lepep, 2009 to 2018, and United Seychelles from 2018), with other parties functioning as a "loyal" opposition. As in Mauritius, differences on policy issues post-1992 are mainly ones of emphasis, with personalities being a feature of party competition. The electoral system combines single-member electorates (using first past the post) and a minority of members elected

country-wide through proportional representation. A good indicator of democratic consolidation was the victory of the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa opposition coalition in the 2016 legislative elections, and then in the general elections (legislative and presidential) of October 2020. Since the latter election, the president has been Wavel Ramkalawan, an Anglican priest, replacing Danny Faure of United Seychelles (the first time this party and its precursors has been out of office since 1976).

In the sense that geographical location is a factor affecting agency, Mauritius and Seychelles have more freedom of manoeuvre than do Sri Lanka and Maldives, given that the latter two are so close to India. While it would be an exaggeration to say India aspires to make the Indian Ocean an 'Indian lake', any such aspiration is much stronger in the areas immediately adjacent to India. In the southwest Indian Ocean such aspirations are much weaker and (all other things being equal – which they are not), there is more scope for island countries to seek their own way. While competition between India and China stretches across the Indian Ocean, it is more intense closer to the subcontinent; in the southwest Indian Ocean other powers (France in particular) complicate the picture.[32] In the case of Seychelles, it can be argued that its remote but strategically important location in the Indian Ocean has enhanced its agency, with its position making it attractive to a number of powers as they compete in the region. This perception has not been as significant with Mauritius, although the situation could change with the Chagos Archipelago (British Indian Ocean Territory) due to come under Mauritian sovereignty under the UK-Mauritius agreement of October 2024.

Strategies of the Indian Ocean island states

As with the discussion of the factors affecting agency, the focus here is on the strategies adopted by the Indian Ocean island states as a means of improving their agency. Both domestic influences and international pressures can have an impact on the choice of strategy.[33] It is not simply a matter of 'rational choice'; the political context is very important. Here we consider four strategies: bandwagoning (aligning with a major power), balancing (developing relations with two or more powers and playing them against each other to maximise advantage), hedging (maintaining flexibility without overcommitting), and multilateralism (participating in regional and global organisations to gain collective strength).[34] These strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but often states will have a dominant strategy.

Sri Lanka and Maldives

While Sri Lanka and Maldives maintain security ties with both India and China, India is clearly the bigger security partner for both. Sri Lanka relies on Chinese

defence equipment, while Maldives depends on Indian defence support. Some Sri Lankan scholars view these purchases as "purely transactional" and emphasise that Sri Lanka has stronger defence links with India than with China.[35] India-Sri Lanka defence ties cover a gamut of activities, including the Annual Defence Dialogue and training for Sri Lankan defence personnel in India. Sri Lanka and Maldives were also part of the India-led Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation (TMSC) mechanism, which now appears to have been subsumed into the Colombo Security Conclave.[36]

Given that both the South Asian states claim to have an 'India-first' policy, it would be difficult to interpret their economic and defence links with China as aimed at balancing against India. Although both Sri Lanka and Maldives may have historically 'flirted' with the idea of balancing against India, it was not by siding with China.[37] In view of the close security links between India and Maldives, particularly under their previous governments, it can plausibly be argued that Maldives pursues a bandwagoning strategy, while Sri Lanka is still hedging and trying to maximise economic gains from both the Asian powers.

Some India-based scholars viewed Sri Lanka's former President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, as a shrewd "small State realist" who was acutely aware of the benefits of hedging between China and India and "only seek[ing] in Beijing what he [was] unable to get from New Delhi".[38] It is clear from the current President Dissanayake's statements after coming to power in September 2024 that Sri Lanka will continue to pursue defence and security links with both China and India, but it is less likely to rely on Chinese loans. Sri Lanka will, of course, continue to seek aid and investments from both India and China.[39]

Mauritius and Seychelles

In the case of Mauritius, the main international strategy is bandwagoning, the major power in question being India. Mauritius's alignment in this respect is evident in the India-Mauritius defence cooperation agreement dating from 1974, as well as Mauritius's participation in the TMSC mechanism since 2014 (initially India-Maldives-Sri Lanka), and now the Colombo Security Conclave. While Mauritius does not have armed forces as such, India assists it with defence-related training and equipment, as well as providing naval patrols and access to relevant facilities.[40] These facilities will expand considerably with the Agalega base. However, Mauritius also engages in hedging by maintaining cooperative relations with China for both economic and strategic reasons, as demonstrated by the 2021 China-Mauritius FTA. With a majority Indian culture, it is natural that Indo-Mauritians at least feel a sense of affinity with India, which is seen as a benign protector, speaking up for Mauritius on issues such as the Chagos Archipelago. Developing a relationship with China is

not at the expense of the relationship with India as Mauritius can derive benefits from a cooperative relationship with Beijing without compromising its relationship with New Delhi.

The international strategy of Seychelles is primarily one of balancing, attempting to maximise advantages for itself by developing relationships with a range of powers (achieving 'balance' in its various relationships, rather than balancing against any power). India provides training, equipment, and facilities to the Seychelles security forces, as well as patrolling the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), with aspirations to construct and use infrastructure primarily for its own strategic purposes (less so since 2020). This sometimes leads to domestic controversy in Seychelles, as with the proposed Indian facilities on Assumption Island. Along with Mauritius, Seychelles joined the TMSC mechanism in 2014,[41] merging in turn with the Colombo Security Conclave from 2020.[42] The balancing approach by Seychelles also involves an element of hedging, allowing for different powers to compete in relation to the island state. From a Seychellois perspective, a recent example of the benefits of Chinese engagement with the island state was a February 2021 grant of US$6.2 million, added to a previous grant of US$11 million.[43] There is a consensus in Seychelles about the balancing strategy being the best way of enhancing the country's agency. More detailed studies have shown how Seychelles has taken this broad approach further through a "smart state foreign policy", whereby practical proposals within the constraints imposed by the major powers can win support. Such proposals can be enhanced by a willingness to take practical action, with good examples being the involvement of Seychelles in both counter-piracy and the development of the Blue Economy. A small foreign ministry can be well-placed to develop a whole-of-government approach, while the Creole culture can be helpful in its cosmopolitanism and appreciation of differences.[44]

Multilateralism

In relation to the four island states, multilateralism is part of their international involvement, complementing such strategies as bandwagoning and balancing; it could also be seen as contributing to hedging. By building international coalitions with like-minded states on key issues, the Indian Ocean island states can achieve their goals more effectively than they would by attempting to do so independently. As far as Indian Ocean organisations are concerned, each of the island states is a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), but this grouping is relatively weak. In the southwest Indian Ocean, both Mauritius and Seychelles participate in the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), which is mainly technical and functional in focus. Sri Lanka and Maldives have also expressed interest in joining, potentially indicating

a broadening focus. Signifying its commitment to multilateralism, Mauritius plays host to the secretariats for both IORA and the IOC.

The major regional body for Sri Lanka and Maldives is the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a grouping that is weakened by the Indo-Pakistani conflict, but with significant elements of economic and functional cooperation. In their role as African countries, Mauritius and Seychelles are members of the African Union (AU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, and the Southern African Development Community. Mauritius also has observer status with SAARC. From the perspective of the island countries, multilateralism enables small and middle powers to collaborate effectively with major powers, regardless of whether those powers are within or outside the given organisation. In the case of Sino-Indian competition, China is not a member of any of the organisations that have been named (although it became an observer to the IOC in 2016). India is an influential member in IORA and SAARC, as well as having observer status with the IOC since 2020. Both India and China engage with the AU as partners. Multilateralism is thus an element in enhancing the agency of the Indian Ocean island states.

Going beyond organisations focused on the Indian Ocean (but having an impact in that context), the four states gain influence through their participation in groupings that are more global in scope. Examples include the Commonwealth (with all four countries as members) and groups advancing the interests of small island states, particularly on climate change. Commonwealth membership links these countries to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; in southern and eastern Africa most countries in this region are also members of the Commonwealth. Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles are among the 33 small states in the Commonwealth (out of a total membership of 56). Through such means as the communiques of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the Indian Ocean island members can have an influence on agenda-setting and the promotion of international norms on issues such as climate change and development. A practical benefit is the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, headquartered in Mauritius, which helps members, particularly vulnerable small island states, secure funding to mitigate global warming. On climate change, the three small island countries have maximised their influence through active roles in the Alliance of Small Island States, a key coalition of Small Island Developing States at the United Nations.

Conclusion

Summing up, we have shown that the agency of the four Indian Ocean island states is influenced by several key factors: their economic and security dependence, the degree of consensus or polarisation in their domestic politics, and their geographical

location. For Maldives and Sri Lanka, proximity to a major power like India plays a significant role, while Seychelles derives agency from its perceived strategic importance. The assessment of the extent of agency is necessarily qualitative and somewhat subjective. However, based on sheer size (covering population and the economy primarily) Sri Lanka is the most significant of the four island states, with a population more than 10 times that of the other three states combined. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's GDP at purchasing power parity (PPP) is about seven times that of the other three. It is not surprising, therefore, that Sri Lanka is able to exercise greater agency in navigating its relations with China and India than the other three. The EEZs claimed by the four states also give them a greater strategic importance than their land areas alone would warrant.

As far as strategies are concerned, again one cannot say definitively with these four states whether a particular approach is more effective than others in maximising agency. In any event, the choice of a strategy is not an exercise in "rational choice", but the outcome of political factors, both domestic and international. We can say with all four states that they engage in hedging to varying degrees, with a view to broadening their options and deriving benefits from a range of international actors. Multilateralism also enhances agency in the sense that small and middle powers (including the four island states) are stronger when they work together.

As acknowledged earlier, agency and structure have a dynamic relationship. A consideration relating to the four island states is the way in which competition in the international system affects their agency. If such competition intensifies, the island states can come under greater pressure to choose sides. In order to avoid having to make such a choice, they aim to encourage de-escalation if there are rising tensions between or among major powers. Nevertheless, there are incentives for the various powers involved in Indian Ocean geopolitics to win the support of the island states and forestall advances by rivals. The small island states are not pawns acting at the behest of more powerful actors, but sovereign states making informed choices.

Notes: chapter 13

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14

Sri Lanka between the major powers: a retreat from non-alignment?

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Introduction

As a sizable island state in the middle of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has begun to link itself to its maritime neighbourhood in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a complement to its historical identification with South Asia.[2] The emergence of India and China as global economic powerhouses has catalysed this development, having transformed the IOR into a critical global trade conduit, with evident economic opportunities for Sri Lanka.[3]

Yet the region also faces vulnerabilities arising from natural factors, including the presence of multiple strategic chokepoints,[4] and political ones, including the lack of an overarching regional security architecture.[5] Sri Lankan policymakers have watched with some concern as these vulnerabilities have played out between China and its neighbours on strategic fronts bordering the IOR, such as the South China Sea,[6] and the Himalayan India-China border.[7] Combined with China's growing investment in strategic assets within the IOR[8] under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the broader US-China trade war,[9] apprehensions began growing in Colombo that these confrontations on the borders of the IOR would eventually spill over into the region itself.

Like other island states in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka now faces hard choices amid these strategic tensions among major powers. Its historical commitment to a non-aligned foreign policy[10] has become more difficult to maintain in the current era of great power competition, particularly given its vision of becoming a regional trading hub,[11] economic pressures, and the need for substantial foreign investment to realise this vision and relieve such pressures.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Sri Lanka's options to deal with this changing strategic environment, particularly in dealing with strategic competition between India and China. Much has already been written on Sri Lanka's reliance on China to develop its long-term infrastructure[12] and more recently, to navigate intense economic pressures since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.[13] This chapter argues that there are many reasons why Sri Lanka has often turned to China, with the effect of potentially constraining its ability to find a balance between India and China. These reasons include China's approach to human rights issues, its 'Buddhist diplomacy' in Sri Lanka, and China's support for rural and southern development, as well as the more recent role of China in addressing Sri Lanka's acute needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, this chapter will elaborate on Sri Lanka's options in the current geopolitical environment for achieving a more pluralist and independent foreign policy.

The internationalisation of Sri Lanka's human rights issues

Unlike India, Sri Lanka did not face any significant territorial conflicts upon attaining independence in 1948. Initially, Colombo was happy to seek an alliance with the United Kingdom as insurance against a possibly assertive India in the future.[14] But with Sirimavo Bandaranaike's premiership in 1960, Sri Lanka sought a more independent path that attempted to consider Third World sensibilities and developmental aspirations. This period, which lasted until 1977, established the guiding precept of non-alignment, which appears to have been embedded as an enduring conceptual legacy in Sri Lanka's foreign policy.

With the escalation and internationalisation of the ethnic Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, particularly after the anti-Tamil riots in 1983, Sri Lanka's foreign policy shifted from a more proactive non-aligned foreign policy that sought to establish an active and engaged role for itself on the global stage, to a more reactive, 'firefighting' policy driven by international reactions to its domestic political issues, particularly those relating to human rights.

This state of affairs arguably continues, as the cessation of open armed conflict in 2009 led to mounting international (primarily Western) pressure on Sri Lanka to investigate and prosecute those responsible for alleged wartime atrocities. As such, Sri Lanka's foreign policy has remained in a firefighting mode, largely dictated

by international reactions to its domestic human rights record and more recently also by acute economic needs. At the same time, Sri Lanka is cognisant of the rise of a new global power, China, which has a policy of 'internalising' rather than internationalising human rights issues. This has created a semblance of greater choice for Sri Lanka as to how (and with whom) it engages on human rights issues.

Sri Lanka has made some attempts in the post-civil war period to proactively address its human rights issues without the cover of 'internal' arguments, most noticeably during the *Yahapalana* (good governance) administration from 2015 to 2019. However, these attempts foundered due to a lack of internal political consensus on how to address persistent concerns about post-war rights and reconciliation. Given the continuing lack of internal consensus and consequent difficulties in constructively engaging with Western countries and India on these issues, Sri Lanka has gradually been incentivised to engage more strongly with China, with its explicitly 'non-interventionist' approach on human rights.

Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and Sri Lankan foreign policy

The gravitation towards China and its 'internalised' approach to human rights issues also reveals a second, closely linked, dimension of the bilateral relationship: China's symbolic acknowledgment of Sinhalese-Buddhist majoritarianism as the status quo of Sri Lankan politics, as well as its engagement with key political, religious, and civil society leaders within that nationalist system.

Since the end of the civil war, Sri Lanka's main political parties, supported by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists, have sought to 'manage' minority discontent, while avoiding post-conflict justice and other legal and policy reforms that their nationalist supporters view as a betrayal of the Sinhalese nation (including its religious and military dimensions).[15]

Analysis by Western commentators acknowledges that Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism plays a role in determining Sri Lankan foreign policy. However, it often assumes that because such ideology was opportunistically nurtured[16] by nationalist governments, more liberal governments can readily roll it back[17] and reset Sri Lanka's foreign policy trajectories (as was the assumption when the Yahapalana government came to power in 2015). This view underestimates the role Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism now plays as a now powerful structural force that no mainstream party appears willing to challenge.

By contrast, China has actively pursued a policy of Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka by fostering links with local clergy and Buddhist societies and institutions.[18] China's focus on connecting with the dominant ethnicity generally makes Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces less likely to oppose its links with Sri Lanka than with

other countries. Such confidence in China is bolstered by its virtual non-engagement with politicians and civil society from Sri Lankan minority communities.

Given the systemic force of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lankan politics, it may be plausible to argue that no Sri Lankan government can now be elected (or expect to survive electorally) on an explicit mandate to roll back or even challenge such nationalist forces. This makes it difficult for any Sri Lankan government to engage wholeheartedly with countries that demand such challenges, and encourages a gravitation towards nations such as China and Russia, which carry no such demands and, in China's case, actively support that nationalist political order.

Post-conflict goals of rural and southern development

Sri Lanka's greater engagement with China in recent years also has a critical development-related aspect, one which rarely figures in external discussions of the bilateral relationship. With the end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka's domestic goals changed from one of surviving and winning the war to one of 'post-war thriving' as the country graduated to lower-middle-income status[19] and positioned itself to reap a peace dividend.[20]

For international audiences and urban elites, these goals emphasised Sri Lanka's ambition to develop as an IOR maritime hub located between Dubai and Singapore.[21] However, these maritime hub ambitions did not feature as prominently in rhetoric for domestic audiences. Instead, a key economic theme to domestic (largely rural) audiences was the closing of the urban-rural development gap via infrastructure development and greater employment opportunities in manufacturing and services.[22]

The vision of economic prosperity presented to domestic audiences helps to explain some of Sri Lanka's strategic choices in the post-war era, particularly in terms of external borrowing and investment. For example, there has been much commentary written on "white elephant"[23] projects in Sri Lanka financed by Chinese loans in rural hinterlands (particularly in Hambantota), which allegedly contributed to the country descending into a Chinese "debt trap".[24] Most of this commentary reduced such investments to political vanity projects, given that Hambantota was the constituency of then President Mahinda Rajapaksa.[25]

While such analyses are valid, they are also incomplete in that they overlook how such projects also sought to deliver on the post-war electoral rhetoric of narrowing the urban-rural development gap. Hambantota, in addition to being President Mahinda Rajapaksa's home constituency, was also one of the poorest districts in the country,[26] and the Chinese-financed projects signalled to local audiences that the government was directing foreign investment and loans towards development at the periphery. The sheer scale of the projects signalled to local constituents that the government was

'thinking big' and 'moving fast' on delivering its promises, despite the questionable process in such projects.[27]

Hambantota's infrastructure projects furthered many economic promises; of creating a maritime hub (to international audiences), and of developing Hambantota (to the president's own constituents), but equally, of closing the urban-rural divide (to a wide range of domestic audiences). While investment opportunities in Hambantota were offered to India and others,[28] it was Chinese funders who were willing to accept them, a fact that some have linked to a debt-trap strategy, but others see as evidence of China's long-term investment strategy. Ultimately, this left China as the only viable financer to meet local visions and promises of economic prosperity.

International outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis

India's initial disbursement of Covishield (AstraZeneca) vaccines successfully developed people-to-people links in Sri Lanka through health sector support, building on its gifts made towards a public ambulance service during the *Yahapalana* government. When India's vaccine diplomacy ended abruptly during the wave of the pandemic that swept India in March to May 2021, China was well-positioned to step up its own vaccine drive. China provided the bulk of the doses that have been administered to date, donating over 2.5 million doses and selling another six million.

The global health crisis compelled the Sri Lankan Government to impose constraints on cross-border travel, resulting in significant economic repercussions, particularly within the tourism sector, which constitutes five per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and indirectly impacts up to 12 per cent. This, in turn, impeded the government's capacity to meet its external debt obligations, necessitating new loans and currency swaps to fortify foreign currency reserves, alongside imposing substantial restrictions on imports. With foreign debt repayments amounting to US$3.8 billion due in 2021, and having paid US$1.3 billion by May 2021, the Sri Lankan Government continued to exhaust its meagre foreign reserves. India channelled approximately US$4 billion to Sri Lanka in the first half of 2022 through credit lines, loans, and grants, surpassing China as Sri Lanka's predominant contributor in financial aid during the crisis.[29] Other neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh also extended a US$250 million currency swap, marking its inaugural provision of such assistance. China's contributions included a US$1.5 billion swap facility in March 2021[30] and disbursements of US$500 million in both March 2020 and April 2021.[31]

Despite some early success in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic repercussions persisted in 2022, amplifying Sri Lanka's economic instability. The decline in income from vital foreign exchange generators such as tourism, coupled

with ill-informed fiscal measures, notably in regard to taxation, culminated in the evaporation of Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves. By September 2022, Sri Lanka's external debt amounted to US$35 billion, representing a 54 per cent increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio from 2021.[32]

Furthermore, the delayed pursuit of financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) culminated in two key events in 2022. Firstly, Sri Lanka defaulted on its external debt obligations for the first time in its history. Secondly, the economic crisis precipitated huge public protests that led to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksha in July 2022, a political event that was without precedent in Sri Lanka. Former Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe assumed the role of president through a parliamentary vote, a process that was constitutional but deemed to lack legitimacy in many quarters and contrary to the spirit of '*The Aragalaya*' (the Sinhala name for the 2022 protests, meaning 'the Struggle'). *The Aragalaya's* many demands included vociferous calls for structural political changes and robust governance reforms.

There were divergent responses among the diplomatic community to the events of July 2022. While India's response remained typically measured, France's Ambassador to Sri Lanka drew historical analogies between the political upheavals in Sri Lanka and the French Revolution of 1789.[33] The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs displayed a seemingly delayed response, only publicising its views well after statements had been issued by other key countries.[34] In local and international political discourse, China was the topic of a pivotal question, specifically, whether extensive infrastructure initiatives under the umbrella of the BRI were a trigger for Sri Lanka's debt crisis.

Although some of China's investments have failed to deliver expected financial returns, Sri Lanka's economic issues go well beyond the BRI and the debt-trap narrative. For example, Sri Lanka was one of the lowest tax-collecting countries in the world, even before former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa decided to further reduce taxes.[35] Correspondingly, the prevailing discourse failed to recognise there were extenuating factors in Sri Lanka seeking Chinese financing. This included reduced access to concessionary funding from traditional bilateral and multilateral sources.[36]

During the peak of the financial crisis, India took an active role in various forms of financial assistance, including a package worth almost US$4 billion through various means, such as currency swaps, deferred loans, credit lines, and investments. These arguably provided Sri Lanka with a temporary opportunity to pursue a more independent course. Nevertheless, the long-term viability of this increased autonomy, which stems from diversifying its engagement, may be short-lived if Sri Lanka fails to swiftly restructure its economy and achieve debt sustainability.

Sri Lanka reached a board-level agreement for an External Fund Facility (EFF) with the IMF on 20 March 2023. Despite a lack of domestic and international confidence that Sri Lanka will be able to meet most of the IMF's targets, it was able to secure an IMF staff-level agreement for the first review of the IMF program after a notable delay of approximately 22 days from September 2023, when it was first expected.[37] The staff-level agreement is a prerequisite for receiving a board-level agreement that will result in a disbursement of US$330 million.

Despite the IMF's recognition of several structural macroeconomic issues in areas such as revenue collection, which were cited as reasons for the delay in obtaining a staff-level agreement during the first review, there is a possibility that Western countries exerted influence in the final approval process. This influence may have been aimed at ensuring Sri Lanka's political and economic instabilities would not leave any openings for Beijing to seek greater political and economic influence.

Envisioning a new Sri Lankan foreign policy

While grateful for Chinese largesse, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lankan policymakers also understand the risks of being viewed as too closely linked to China when its rise has led to increasing tensions with India, Japan, and Western countries, and when Sri Lanka's development prospects are tied to being viewed as open to trade and investment from a multiplicity of countries and companies. For these reasons, the Sri Lankan Government has repeatedly reiterated its non-aligned stance, which it has some difficulty maintaining when its economic reliance on China has visibly increased and when it has also supported Chinese positions in international fora, including at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2021 on the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang.

Rather than simply reiterating its non-aligned stance and other conceptual visions such as a rules-based order in the IOR, Sri Lankan policymakers could instead adopt a more pragmatic approach towards addressing specific perceptions and concerns about its relationship with China, including those relating to an alleged mismanagement of Chinese funds, or a lack of transparency. There is a precedent for this approach: during the time of the Yahapalana government, Sri Lanka's foreign policy think tanks took an active approach to counter some perceptions of debt-trap diplomacy, via locally based research[38] and publications.[39]

One of the main charges brought against the Sri Lankan Government in the mismanagement of its finances has to do with its ill-advised borrowing of short-term loans at commercial interest rates.[40] To ensure such borrowing is kept at a minimum, Sri Lanka could look at the growing official international development arm of China, which has spawned institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

(AIIB) and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), to secure long-term, low-interest borrowings to finance future infrastructure needs.

It is in Sri Lanka's interest to advocate for greater transparency on BRI-related projects using appropriate fora such as the Belt and Road Forum, and through regional organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). As a recipient nation, Sri Lanka should also look at ways to remind China that, given the amount of attention Chinese developments in Sri Lanka have attracted globally, it is in China's interest to ensure not only that the projects succeed, but that they are delivered with a high degree of transparency and oversight. This would in turn signify the arrival of China as a global leader that takes its development and aid obligations seriously, showcasing competence and diligence.

Aid agencies also require a sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics of the countries they assist. The CIDCA should perhaps look to diversify the regions where it has chosen to carry out its investments in Sri Lanka in the past. Investing in Tamil-speaking areas – which have traditionally been a vacuum filled by India – could be a way to break up the current foreign investment dynamics. India should also heed the same lesson and look to invest more in Sinhala-speaking regions. Such actions could also help alleviate suspicions among certain sections of the Sinhala population regarding India's role in developing the Tamil-majority north and east.

In addition to specifically addressing assumptions about its debt and infrastructure development, Sri Lanka should work to embed a more consistent foreign policy that its partners can rely on, irrespective of changes in government. The idea of a foreign policy white paper updated every 10 years has been mooted, but is unfortunately yet to be implemented. Such a paper should aim to provide the vision and mission for Sri Lankan foreign policy and indicate broad contours in the form of planned free trade agreements, security arrangements, and major infrastructure development projects.

To address Indian perceptions and concerns about Sri Lanka's evolving relations with China, Sri Lankan policymakers could explicitly recognise the 'special' relationship it has with India, and its role and aspirations as a regional security provider. To this end, both countries should aim to negotiate a bilateral treaty that would outline a list of mutually prohibited activities and security assurances through fora such as the Annual Indo-Sri Lanka Defence Dialogue.[41] Such a framework would help Sri Lanka clarify its position with the major powers operating in the IOR.

Another key principle would be to adopt an 'open door, open eyes' maritime policy that, while welcoming friendly surface vessels from any foreign navy, also focuses on developing capabilities in both surface and sub-surface detection. This would provide assurance to India of Sri Lanka's commitment towards not entertaining Chinese submarine reconnaissance in Sri Lankan waters.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined some of the reasons why Sri Lanka has turned towards China for economic and diplomatic support. The reasons are pragmatic when considered from the perspective of post-war economic development, and survivalist when considering the questions of post-war accountability and other rule of law questions. Western powers would need to tread cautiously in engaging with Sri Lanka on these questions, lest they politically or economically propel the country back into further dependence on China.

From Sri Lanka's perspective, it should enhance the transparency and consistency of its positions and rebuild any loss of trust, while dispelling other notions of strategic hedging. It seems idealistic to hope that Sri Lanka will soon regain the prestige it had in the 20th century as a leader in the Non-Aligned Movement, but there are immediate opportunities for it to act more proactively and pragmatically to address prevailing perceptions about its relationship with China, and ensure stability in its multi-faceted relationship with India. These include constancy in its multilateral ties, including with groupings like the Commonwealth and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, where Sri Lanka has long held influence without being constrained by the great power dynamics inherent in other multilateral fora like BRICS and the SCO, and for that matter, within the UN.

The seismic political shift in Sri Lanka in 2024 marked a decisive break from the dominance of traditional parties that had governed since independence. The National People's Power party, led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, secured an overwhelming mandate, signaling a new chapter in Sri Lanka's political trajectory. The party's manifesto emphasises diplomacy, non-alignment, and regional engagement, notably expressing strong support for Sri Lanka's membership in BRICS.[42] While the government's long-term foreign policy direction remains uncertain, early indications suggest a pragmatic approach, particularly on economic matters. Critics' fears of radical divergence have so far proven unfounded, as the administration continues the IMF-backed economic reform program initiated by its predecessor, including the recent Staff-Level Agreement on the Third Review of Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility Arrangement.[43]

Notes: chapter 14

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15

Seychelles: the engagement of a small island state with major powers in the Indian Ocean

DENNIS HARDY

Seychelles, a small island state in the western Indian Ocean, finds itself in the geopolitical cross-currents of greater powers. Retaining the support of these powers is a prime objective of the country's foreign policy, and it has to exercise full agency to achieve this. This paper recognises the nation's agency by clarifying the aims of its foreign policy and then focusing on the main issues it has to confront. Careful navigation is needed to find a way through the potentially turbulent waters of this dynamic and increasingly important part of the world.

'A friend of all and an enemy of none' is a popular maxim in Seychelles. Non-alignment underpins its international relations and portrays the country as one of the region's 'good guys'. But who sets the rules of engagement, and how can a small island state make the most of its few strategic assets? Indeed, in the face of stronger forces, how can it retain its much-prized sovereignty? Geopolitical alignments in the Indian Ocean continue to change and the key to survival is constant adaptation. Seychelles has done well to date, but what new challenges lie ahead?

'Surprising strengths'

The agency of a small island state should not be overstated as, in most cases, it remains subject to the greater power and policies of others. That is the natural order of things – larger nations will necessarily dominate the agenda at the expense of smaller ones – but there are ways in which the latter can make their presence known. In the words of the American analyst Nilanthi Samaranayake, "In addition to common needs and common concerns, island states also possess surprising strengths with regard to great powers."[1] In the case of Seychelles, what are these 'surprising strengths'? What assets can it bring to bear to achieve its own interests? And how has it been able to make best use of them?

The tiny nation – with fewer than 100,000 people and a land area of barely 460 square kilometres – invariably appears as no more than a dot on the world map. Geographically, it might seem, it is a place of little consequence. Far from anywhere, it failed to attract permanent settlement until the second half of the 18th century.[2] In the present context, however, this seemingly inconsequential place has its own assets, and the challenge its diplomats face is to use these to the full.

First and foremost, its distant location attracts the interest of major powers. The reasons are not, at first, obvious. In all directions Seychelles is surrounded by sea, far from even its nearest neighbours. Flight times range between two-and-a-half hours to Mauritius, three hours to Nairobi, and four hours or more to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India. But in the modern world its remoteness is also an asset, offering a strategic landing point in an otherwise largely empty stretch of ocean. For the founding President, James Mancham, the lure of Seychelles as an independent nation has always been its location:

> Taking account of the fact that Seychelles' 110 [sic] islands are scattered over a wide surface of the western Indian Ocean, which includes a valuable oil route, and taking into account that important oil-producing nations are within rocket-striking distance, the geopolitical importance of the Seychelles cannot be overestimated.[3]

Granitic mountains that rise sharply from the sea, and low-lying coral atolls elsewhere in the archipelago, invite long-recognised opportunities for foreign navies and listening posts. Even in the colonial era, when most of its limited income was derived from plantations producing vanilla, cinnamon, copra, and patchouli, the British Navy used the deep-water port of Victoria (the capital of Seychelles, on the main island of Mahé) to refuel and for light repairs to support its activities in the wider region. From 1971, Seychelles could also offer a lengthy air strip, built primarily for military needs but later serving as the mainstay for the country's incoming tourists.

During the Cold War, Seychelles played its cards well. As a result of a coup in 1977 that ousted the founding president in favour of a Marxist-based regime, the nation aligned itself within the Soviet bloc. Russian ships could be seen in the port of Victoria, Tanzanian troops were stationed on Mahé to train the new defence force, the likes of Cuba and Libya established embassies, and the new President (France Albert René) commissioned a unit of personal bodyguards from North Korea.[4] It was all a far cry from the tranquil atmosphere it replaced, when a highlight of the day was the traditional ritual of tea on the lawn of State House, hosted by one of the former British governors, resplendent in a white suit and an extravagantly plumed helmet. And yet, in spite of the unmistakable direction taken by the young nation, René struck a deal with the United States, the ideological counterpoint, to allow the retention of a satellite tracking station on his country's main island. The deal appeased the great power and yielded a valuable source of foreign exchange. René was adept at playing off one faction against another, in his domestic politics and internationally, setting the pattern for his successors as well. Balancing the interests of opposing sides has proved to be an enduring feature of the country's diplomacy.[5]

After the Cold War, despite the existence of the US base at Diego Garcia (some 1,800 kilometres to the east) and, more recently, the proliferation of military facilities in Djibouti on the African mainland, foreign navies have continued to make use of Seychelles. It is not only the port that is valued but also the fact that the far-flung islands can be used to monitor shipping movements in the further reaches of the western Indian Ocean, including surveillance at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel. With the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the region, and India's concern not to be outflanked by its Asian rival, the strategic importance of Seychelles has increased. It is courted by both of these Asian nations and, as it has done with other great powers in the past, it seeks to maintain the support of both.

Location is by far the most important geopolitical factor for larger nations with an interest in the Indian Ocean, but there are other assets that strengthen the country's international influence. One is to be found in its valuable fisheries, especially tuna.[6] The archipelagic geography of Seychelles gives it a marine jurisdiction of 1.3 million square kilometres (equivalent to three-and-a-half times the area of Germany). This constitutes a resource of great interest to major powers within and beyond the immediate region. China, Japan, South Korea and the nations of Europe are all prodigious consumers of fish. Fisheries are not the only area of interest, however, as the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the otherwise small nation contains known reserves of natural gas and oil, not to mention the potential of other marine resources.

A further asset is its unique tropical environment. While this would not normally be a factor of geopolitical importance, it is for Seychelles in one specific respect – it has become a favoured destination for the UAE royal family. Planning

restrictions were relaxed to allow construction of a palace on a prominent skyline for the ruler's use, while other palatial homes and resorts funded by Arab investors have been built close to the sea. The overtly pro-UAE policy was strongly promoted during James Michel's 12-year presidency, with the enthusiastic support of founding President James Mancham. Both took the view that the benefits to the country far outweighed any concessions. As time has gone on, however, there is a feeling amongst the public that too much has been conceded and that Seychelles has sacrificed some of its sovereignty.

Finally, another of Seychelles' 'surprising strengths' is its internationally recognised and pioneering work in promoting the Blue Economy as a framework for the sustainable and productive management of the ocean. Maritime security specialists Christian Bueger and Anders Wivel point out that Seychelles' leadership in this field is widely recognised.[7] Former President James Michel was a prominent advocate and set in motion a number of important initiatives. As a result, through its expertise and, more recently, local experiments, Seychelles gained a place on the world stage that might otherwise have been beyond reach.[8] It helped that Michel came across as an honest broker with a bipartisan vision that chimed well with global concerns for the welfare of the world's seas. He was the right person at the right time, performing a role that his predecessor, President René, with his strident Marxist stance, could never have achieved with the same degree of neutrality.

Diplomatic impunity

After 43 years with the same ruling party, elections held in October 2020 finally brought the main political opposition to power in Seychelles.[9] There was a popular demand for domestic change but, in terms of foreign policy, all the signs were that it would be more of the same; there was no question of aligning with one of the major powers at the expense of others. In a well-considered article, Jean-Pierre Cabestan answered his own question, "can Victoria afford to act differently?" with the view that "it would probably not be in its interest. Being a small state, even hedging against China would be risky".[10]

In his first address to the National Assembly (the Seychelles parliament), President Wavel Ramkalawan pledged to continue working with all countries, but emphasised, "Our sovereignty is sacred and, not at any moment, will we give it away to any country."[11] Locally, this was interpreted as a message directed to India, with which there was an immediate issue (explained later in this chapter). However, his speech also had a wider resonance. From the outset of independence in 1976, sovereignty has been a principal axiom of foreign policy. On the surface, at least, it is non-negotiable. In principle, this assertion is hardly surprising and little different from the rhetoric of any other nation. Given its history of more than two centuries of

colonial rule, no leader of the small island state could reasonably be expected to say anything to the contrary.

Inevitably, the reality is somewhat different and, in its international power relations (as already mentioned in relation to the UAE), concessions to greater powers are regularly made, ideally with specific benefits in return. But as the junior partner, Seychelles always has to act smart in negotiations. When it does business, for instance, with countries like India and China, its vulnerability as a tiny nation is sharply exposed. The scenario is not so much that it is any longer in danger of being annexed, as it was in the colonial era, but it is prudent to remain on good terms with more powerful nations and use to the full range of Seychelles' assets. As already indicated, a small island state is necessarily limited in what it can achieve on the world stage, but it would be wrong to assert that there is nothing at all in its diplomatic bag.

Sovereignty must be balanced with a second axiom of foreign policy, maintaining the active support of major powers. Glorious isolation is not an option, and Seychelles has had to find ways to maximise international support, even if this means chipping away at some aspects of its sovereignty. Seychelles particularly relied on overseas assistance in the aftermath of the 2020 pandemic and its impact on the economy. This came in the form of donations of domestic infrastructure, defence equipment and joint security operations, and direct grants for specific projects and loans on favourable terms. Examples of assistance during the coronavirus pandemic included India and the UAE each gifting 50,000 (later increased to 75,000) doses of COVID-19 vaccine.[12] During and since the pandemic, Seychelles could not afford to jeopardise any one of these important sources of support and its diplomats have the constant task of keeping the various lines open. Smart diplomacy – aligning Seychelles' interests with those of larger nations – and pragmatism are the order of the day.

The protection of sovereignty and maintaining the support of foreign powers were tested earlier this century in confronting piracy off the coast of Somalia (to the north-west of the archipelago).[13] Seychelles was directly affected because its own fishermen were endangered, as were tourists who sailed in some of the lonely seas between the outer islands. The pirates mainly commandeered boats and held the crews to ransom. With fishing and tourism – the two main pillars of the economy – both threatened, Seychelles could not allow the situation to continue. Apart from the dangers it posed to lives and livelihoods, essential supplies to the import-dependent nation were at risk. It was estimated that the additional costs to ensure safe shipping amounted to some four per cent of the country's national income.[14]

Lacking the capacity to counter the attacks on its own, Seychelles took a leading role in enlisting the support of other nations that used western Indian Ocean shipping routes.[15] It was a 'win-win' strategy as the goal of restoring safe navigation matched

those of its allies. So successful was its approach that it became a founding member of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia and, in due course, Seychelles was chosen to chair the international body. Through the united action of its member states, piracy in the region was effectively contained. Experience shows that the threat persists; as soon as measures are relaxed, it is evident that new incidents will occur.[16] A longer-term lesson is that, apart from its direct contribution to this particular issue, Seychelles' involvement demonstrated that even a small island state can play a pivotal regional and even international role. As further evidence of its influence, Seychelles was again, in 2024, invited to chair the international body, Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities, with an extended mandate to tackle other illegal activities in the maritime region.

Ocean cross-currents

In spite of moments in the limelight, due to power disparities in its international relations, Seychelles will almost always be on the back foot, relying on its diplomats to make the most of its various assets. Most efforts are directed to the two Asian powers, China and India, while not neglecting the possibility of other challenges coming to the fore. The US keeps a watchful eye on the region. Although its military presence is centred on Djibouti and Diego Garcia, it is believed that drones (allegedly unarmed) are held in a hangar at Seychelles International Airport.[17] In June 2023, after 27 years of withdrawal, the US reopened its embassy in the Seychelles capital. At the time of writing, an ambassador has yet to be appointed and, with the election Donald Trump as the next American president, it remains to be seen whether those plans will be fulfilled. The expectation, though, is that the new president will prioritise the Indo-Pacific over present commitments in Europe.

France, another nuclear power, maintains a presence in the Indian Ocean that cannot be ignored, although relations with Seychelles have always been good. So, too, Britain, having once announced its withdrawal from east of Suez, is once again 'tilting back' to the region. Its last colony, the British Indian Ocean Territory, is a still an unresolved bone of contention. With the largest island in the archipelago being home to the American military base of Diego Garcia, handing over the archipelago to Mauritius may not please the new American Administration.

Road across the sea

Of all the recent changes, it is China's growing presence that has most altered the geopolitical balance; so much so that the region itself has been redefined by policy-makers as the Indo-Pacific, a term which extends the boundaries into the South China Sea and beyond as part of a geographical and geopolitical continuum. For Seychelles,

'the China factor' is an evolving change. With its Cold War experience of navigating between great powers, it has so far shown itself equal to this new challenge.[18]

From the outset of independence, China claimed a prominent presence in Seychelles. It was quick to recognise the new island nation and to build a well-fortified embassy on the edge of Victoria. Following the socialist coup in 1977, there was then an ideological tie between the two that continued through the remaining years of the Cold War. Since then, however, the nature of the relationship has changed, based less on a common political doctrine and more on China's increased strategic interest in the region. As a consequence, Seychelles is being drawn more directly into new relationships with other major powers, particularly India.

China's evolving ties with Africa, formalised in 1996 when the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin proposed the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, have contributed to this new situation.[19] As a member of the Forum, Seychelles has since benefited from some of the various inducements China offers to African countries, but no-one believes that this is simply a matter of altruism. It was telling that in 2007, the tiny nation hosted a visit by no less than Chinese President Hu Jintao. A grand strategy was emerging in Beijing, centred on links with Africa to provide China's fast-growing economy with a constant source of minerals and other resources. The ascendancy of Xi Jinping to the leadership in 2012, and his promotion of the expansionist Belt and Road Initiative, reinforced the direction of events. In the new scenario, the Indian Ocean can be seen as a bridge to Africa and in itself an emergent line of economic development, portrayed initially as a "maritime Silk Road".[20] But Seychelles has never featured as a major point for investment in the new road across the sea, as has occurred, for instance, in Sri Lanka, Maldives, and the African mainland. Partly in consequence, Seychelles has so far avoided the threat of falling into a debt trap.

Western powers are most alarmed by China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Being so far from its home bases, this does not necessarily pose an immediate threat, but it will be only a matter of time before it does. One aspect of the still-evolving strategy that emanates from Beijing is to secure a number of 'stepping stones' (or, more evocatively, a 'string of pearls') across the ocean. These harbours support China's merchant shipping and protect, through its naval presence, its substantial investments in the countries of the region. According to a 2014 report in the *China Daily,* Beijing has plans to build some 18 "overseas strategic support bases" across the Indian Ocean. [21] They are of three types: one for logistical support in peacetime; a second type for logistical support, warship berthing, aircraft landing strips and onshore R&R; and a third for a comprehensive range of facilities, including large warship weapons maintenance. Seychelles is designated in the second category.[22]

Although, at the height of anti-piracy operations in the region, China was offered the option of enhancing its presence in Victoria, it chose not to do so.[23]

Indian Assumptions

For India, another major power, the threat to its own hegemony in what is named the 'Indian' Ocean (an accident of history but not without consequence) can no longer be ignored. At different times since gaining nationhood in 1947, India has veered more towards Russia or the US, but has seen value in remaining non-aligned.[24] When Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, however, India's previous foreign policy was overhauled.[25] China's increasing presence in the region was one important reason for doing so. For Seychelles, the emergence of a new relationship between these two Asian powers changed its own position. How could the small island nation remain friends of both when one or the other of the great powers was tugging it in its own direction? Diplomacy, which had helped to achieve something of a balance in the past, was again called on to find a safe route.

As part of its response to China's presence, India made a bid to secure suitably located facilities to strengthen its own navy's capacity. A favoured location was Assumption, an outlying coral atoll in a remote stretch of the south-western Indian Ocean, some 700 kilometres from the port of Victoria. Its strategic importance is that it is close to the northern head of the Mozambique Channel, a major shipping route that leads to the southern tip of Africa and then the Atlantic.[26] Initially, India requested an improved airstrip and new landing facilities on the island, which would serve its interests and those of the Seychelles coastguard. On that basis, and with an understanding that other navies would be able to use the facilities, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2012 between India and Seychelles.[27] At the time, the agreement attracted little public attention. It was only after Modi came to power that India's demands increased.

In the absence of an official communique, rumours spread of plans to build a garrison to accommodate 500 personnel.[28] Despite the Seychelles coastguard's shared use of some facilities, public concern grew, encouraged not least of all by the then leader of the political opposition and now President, Wavel Ramkalawan. Social media posts fanned the flames, warning that Seychelles could find itself in the middle of a confrontation between two nuclear powers, not to mention that the new development would threaten the fragile environment of the neighbouring world heritage site of Aldabra. With elections looming, the previous president announced that Assumption would not proceed and the issue did not feature in subsequent campaigning. Faced with an impasse, India negotiated an agreement with Mauritius to locate a military base on the islands of Agalega. This offered a foothold on a similar

latitude to Assumption, but too far to the east to control access to the Mozambique Channel. For that reason, especially if China secures a new base in the north of Madagascar, as is sometimes rumoured, the issue cannot necessarily be regarded as closed.[29]

Even if Assumption is no longer at the top of the Indian Ocean agenda, it shows how Seychelles can exercise its agency when required. It is interesting to note that the task of its diplomats in this case was not only to respect the principle of sovereignty, nor only to limit offence to India in not acceding to its request, but also to take account of how China would view any concession. It was surely no coincidence that a month after the senior Indian official's visit, China's foreign minister included Seychelles in his own regional tour.[30] If India were to have been granted a base on Assumption, would China have returned to the option of upgraded military facilities in Victoria? The diplomatic stakes were always high and no-one could envy Ramkalawan's task of finding a way forward that pleased (or at least did not alienate) all parties. In any case, it is questionable whether Seychelles did the right thing: looking further down the line, the long-term cost of rejecting India's proposal can only be surmised.

Restless sea

China and India are at the top of the Seychelles foreign policy agenda, but a weather eye must be kept open for other possible changes in the region. For instance, what if resolving the future of the Chagos Islands has unintended consequences for Seychelles? Or, to take a different scenario, will Japan (which opened its own embassy in Victoria in November 2019) be satisfied to retain a watching brief in the Indian Ocean, or will it seek a more interventionist role? Then again, one can never ignore the fact that the northern rim contains nuclear powers, especially India and Pakistan, where there are obvious tensions. And there is always the prospect that a potential newcomer to the nuclear club, Iran, in an impetuous moment could change the balance of power overnight. Another factor is the danger of increasing Islamic insurgency along the east coast of Africa and its potential to spill over.[31] Finally, climate change will impact the region and could alter the balance of power, with some countries struggling to adapt more than others. Food security is a related issue, and one of the lessons of the pandemic is that small nations such as Seychelles need to produce more food locally and rely less on vulnerable supply lines.[32]

The way ahead is uncertain and the very best of diplomacy will be called for, with little room for error. It is far from plain sailing and only the most skilled of navigators will find safe passage in the days ahead.

Between Scylla and Charybdis

When Homer's mythical character Odysseus confronted a narrow channel in the Mediterranean, he had to steer between Scylla, a six-headed monster ready to devour him, and Charybdis, a deadly whirlpool that threatened to engulf his vessel. China and India are neither monsters nor whirlpools, but great care will be needed to steer a safe course between them. For Seychelles, this kind of careful manoeuvring is nothing new; it has worked in the past, and its proven navigational capacity must continue to work in the future.

Perhaps the secret to balancing opposing interests is that, while Seychelles is of some value to all, it is essential to none. If major powers cannot find what they seek in Seychelles, they will find alternatives. The archipelago provides a stepping stone in a large ocean, but little more. It pays Seychelles to keep good relations with major powers in the region, but the price of doing so in terms of concessions has never been too high. As in any good deal, there is something in it for everyone and the challenge is to find just what that is.

Notes: chapter 15

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6 The large-scale industrial tuna fishing industry is a key contributor to the Seychelles' economy, providing ~17 per cent of the country's employment and 68 per cent of the entire export trade. Although these large-scale, almost exclusively export-oriented, tuna fisheries make a significant revenue contribution to the economy, they are dominated by foreign fleets and foreign beneficial ownership. Hanna J Christ, Rachel White, Lincoln Hood, Gabriel MS Vianna and Dirk Zeller, "A Baseline for the Blue Economy: Catch and Effort History in the Republic of Seychelles' Domestic Fisheries," *Frontiers in Marine Science,* May (2020).
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Conclusion
Understanding the Indian Ocean's strategic future as part of the Indo-Pacific

DAVID BREWSTER AND RORY MEDCALF

This closing chapter draws on the many threads in this volume to offer some conclusions about the strategic future of the Indian Ocean as part of the broader Indo-Pacific region. We will first examine evolving understandings of the Indo-Pacific concept, including its purpose and geographic scope. Second, using the findings of preceding chapters, we consider the strategic dynamics and security challenges in the Indian Ocean, and differences with the Pacific. Third, we consider how the strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean region are evolving as part of developments in the broader Indo-Pacific. We conclude that while the Indo-Pacific concept provides valuable insights into future strategic dynamics in the Indian Ocean, there are also important differences between the Indian Ocean and Pacific that will contribute to a different and unique form of multipolarity within the Indian Ocean.

The Indo-Pacific concept and the Indian Ocean

In understanding the place of the Indian Ocean within the Indo-Pacific, it is worth recalling how the Indo-Pacific concept developed and became more or less accepted by most countries in the region, although with somewhat different emphases and geographical focus.

The first contemporary articulation, at least at a political level, about the Indo-Pacific region is often attributed to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his famous 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007, when he discussed how the strategic dynamics of the Indian and Pacific Oceans were converging. Australian policymakers and analysts were also among the earliest and most considered supporters of the idea. Indeed, Australia is credited with being the first country to develop and deploy an Indo-Pacific concept as a framework for foreign and defence policy in a new era.[1]

In the years up to 2018, there was an extended debate within the Indian security community over the value for India of the Indo-Pacific concept. Some Indian analysts argued that India should focus on its more immediate region of the Indian Ocean and expressed concerns about the potential for India to be sucked into conflicts in the South China Sea or elsewhere in the Pacific. It wasn't really until 2018 that the Modi government took a clear public position that it saw India's future as involving it playing a significant role across the broader Indo-Pacific.

In contrast, the United States was somewhat of a laggard in adopting the idea of the Indo-Pacific, perhaps reflecting bureaucratic divisions or Washington's longstanding preoccupation with the Middle East. It wasn't until the release of an Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2019 that the US government fully embraced the concept.

Even China, which has sought to pour cold water on the Indo-Pacific concept as a US 'plot' to contain China[2], has adopted its own Indo-Pacific strategy, which involves building its influence and presence across the extended region under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative. Indeed, the Maritime Silk Road can be described as the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics.

The provenance and character of the Indo-Pacific redefinition of a maritime Asia-centric region is elaborated elsewhere.[3] Academic debate will long continue as to whether the Indo-Pacific is an analytical construct more or less valid than the equally manufactured term 'Asia-Pacific' from the late 20th century. But the reality is that by the early 2020s, variants on the Indo-Pacific had been rapidly adopted by many nations as the dominant definition of the world's strategic, economic and demographic centre of gravity. In the authors' view, the popularisation of this concept has been a quiet success for Australia as an activist middle power and ideational entrepreneur.[4]

Key multilateral groupings operating in the Indian Ocean region have also recognised the need to adopt their own statements regarding the Indo-Pacific that reflect their own imperatives. In 2019, ASEAN adopted the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", apparently at the urging of Indonesia, which was concerned about preserving the idea of 'ASEAN centrality' in the broader region.[5] The Outlook includes an almost grudging acknowledgement of the existence of the Indo-Pacific as

a "closely integrated and connected region", while emphasising the need to reinforce an ASEAN-centred regional architecture. Among other things, the ASEAN Outlook is aimed at "helping to promote an enabling environment for peace, stability and prosperity in the region in addressing common challenges, upholding the rules-based regional architecture, and promoting closer economic cooperation, and thus strengthen confidence and trust."[6]

In 2022, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which represents nearly all Indian Ocean littoral states, followed suit in adopting "IORA's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" which comments that: "The interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans is fundamental to understanding the Indo-Pacific region." The Outlook then lists objectives to guide IORA's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.[7]

Indian Ocean states are increasingly adopting their own Indo-Pacific strategies or statements. For example, in 2023, Bangladesh published its 'Indo-Pacific Outlook,' which reflects many of the objectives of the IORA statement.[8] East African countries have also begun puzzling over what the Indo-Pacific region means for them.[9]

While more recent statements on the Indo-Pacific tend to avoid clear positions on major power competition, they do include an emphasis on maritime security, compliance with international law, and promotion of prosperity through open, transparent and inclusive rule-based systems. In other words, they reflect a wish that confrontation with China can be avoided and that China can ultimately be lured into complying with a rules-based regional order.

The redefinition of this region has not just been some convenient or arbitrary choice. Rather, it recognises the vital importance of the flows of trade, energy, investment, people, and security capability that are breaking down late 20th century barriers between a Pacific-centric East Asian or Asia-Pacific region and a South Asian theatre restricted to the Indian Ocean. Not only was India becoming an outward-looking power, and being embraced as such by the US, but China was staking much of its economic and political stability on its access to the Indian Ocean – the sea lanes for its oil lifelines, soon to be recast as the Maritime Silk Road in Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road (later Belt and Road Initiative) strategy.

Over the last decade or so, China's increasingly affronting assertiveness confirmed in the minds of many policymakers the reality of the Indo-Pacific as a zone of strategic competition. Moreover, the distinct character of the region included some of the ingredients for limiting or balancing Chinese power: it was too large for any empire – new or old – to dominate, and engaged the interests of many players across collapsed geographic boundaries.

The Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean

The early 21st-century rise of the Indo-Pacific was not the first time that the littorals of the Asian continent had been redefined. From the mid 1970s, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, middle powers such as Australia and Japan were enthusiastic supporters of the then new idea of the 'Asia-Pacific'. This new-minted regional definition geographically encompassed East Asia, the US and Australia/Oceania, while essentially excluding India and the rest of South Asia. Although principally aimed at promoting economic integration among the fast-growing economies of East Asia, it also had a strategic objective of keeping the US engaged in Asia as the main security provider.

From the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, a whole new diplomatic architecture of an Asia-Pacific region was created, notably the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping and various ASEAN-centric arrangements such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Economics was prioritised; even when security was on the agenda, as in the ARF, it was with a light touch, and the hard issues of interstate rivalry were often skirted or ignored completely. In aggregate, these arrangements tended to marginalise South Asia and Indian Ocean countries: the eventual admission of India and Pakistan to the ARF, or its academic counterpart the Council on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), was accompanied by concerns that somehow South Asian security rivalries would interfere with the consensus-driven character of Asia-Pacific institutional development.

Not that the Indian Ocean was entirely without diplomatic initiatives for region-building. There were efforts from the early 1990s to replicate Asia-Pacific arrangements through the creation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (now called the Indian Ocean Rim Association or IORA) which was intended in particular to promote voluntary trade liberalisation and regional economic integration. But IORA failed to gain traction amongst its members: the Indian Ocean was simply too diverse and there were too few imperatives towards economic or political integration. IORA became little more than a talk shop – and sometimes barely even that. The Indian Ocean as a whole failed to develop the web of transregional arrangements that had grown in the Pacific.

The diplomatic architecture of the Asia-Pacific was a notable success story in late 20th-century regionalism, and suited the challenges and opportunities of the post-Cold War world. But strategic developments over the last two decades or so have required a new understanding of regions. Traditionally, the Pacific and Indian Oceans have been seen as largely separate strategic spheres. East Asia and the Pacific operated with one set of economic, political, and security dynamics, and South Asia and the Indian Ocean with another. Interactions between the two theatres

were limited, reflecting constraints in the economic, political, and military reach of countries in East Asia and the Indian Ocean. These traditional perceptions were reflected in understandings of the boundaries of the 'Asia Pacific' region which, as noted previously, extended only to the Indian border, thus excluding India and most of the Indian Ocean.

Rise of the Indo-Pacific

But this conception of separate regions largely defined by the Indian and Pacific Oceans is now changing. Increasing strategic interactions between those theatres, driven principally by China's growing economic, political, and military power and to some extent also India's emergence as a major regional power, require a broader concept of 'region'. It is no longer sufficient to put the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean theatres in separate boxes in understanding major power relations, especially in the maritime realm.

It is important to understand that the Indo-Pacific is not just a geographic concept that combines all the littoral states of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. That would make little practical sense. Rather, the Indo-Pacific concept emphasises functionality and connectivity just as much as geography. Particularly in the strategic and geoeconomic dimensions, the Indo-Pacific can be considered a super-regional system or, to borrow a concept from Barry Buzan, a "regional supercomplex".[10] The Indo-Pacific offers a valuable framework for responding to the changing strategic environment, particularly the growing strategic and economic interactions between East Asia and the Indian Ocean. It has particular value in understanding strategic interactions among major powers along the Asian littoral and their implications for the region's sea lines of communication (SLOCs).

Definitions of where the Indo-Pacific begins and ends differ among countries. Some, such as the US and Australia, tend (whether officially or unofficially) to see the Indo-Pacific as ending on the western border of India, while others such as India, understandably see the Indo-Pacific as encompassing the entire Indian Ocean region. To the extent that the Indo-Pacific region is defined by the theatre of competition among the major powers and by economic interconnections, then it seems likely that in the long term the definition of the Indo-Pacific will grow to include the western Indian Ocean. This is particularly so if China's (and Russia's) military and political presence in that region grows, along with greater strategic competition with the US, India, Japan and Australia and other partners such as France and the United Kingdom.

Of course, the Indo-Pacific is about connectivity as well as contestation: a theme underscored, for instance, when Shinzo Abe launched Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy in 2016 with a speech in Nairobi focused on development, economics and maritime trade links. The future interests in the western Indian Ocean and East

Africa of countries such as the US, Japan, India, Australia and other countries in East Asia and Europe may not only be defined by strategic risks, but increasingly also by economic opportunities. The large populations and booming economies of East African states such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania could make for increasingly important economic actors and partners for many nations towards mid-century and beyond. Even if bilateral economic ties remain uneven, it is highly likely that various Indo-Pacific countries will engage more closely in Africa.

Oceans apart: differences in strategic dynamics and security challenges

The Indo-Pacific has become a valuable – even indispensable – tool for understanding the interests and interactions of major powers in the Pacific and Indian Ocean theatres. But it would be a mistake to assume that precisely the same strategic dynamics operate in the two theatres or that they face the same security challenges: a commonly recognised limitation of the Indo-Pacific idea. Despite significant convergences, important differences remain and these need to be reflected in strategies towards the Indian Ocean.

Although there are significant overlaps in key players between the two theatres, respective strategic imperatives often differ between the theatres. In the Pacific, despite the interests of many substantial players including Japan and Russia, the key major power contest is between the US and China, as China effectively seeks to erode US influence or even banish it from the region. In the Indian Ocean, many nations are active but there are three major powers in particular: India, China, and the US. While the US and India are in a strategic e*ntente* vis-a-vis China, the sharpest strategic contest is between India and China.

India is the major power with the most pronounced and comprehensive strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. As discussed in chapter 2 (Indian naval strategy and China), Delhi perceives China's growing presence in South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean as representing a direct threat to its long-standing aspirations towards regional leadership or indeed a respected role at the global top table. India also faces a direct military threat from China along their disputed Himalayan border. In short, South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean is India's priority theatre where it has an imperative to establish and maintain a dominant role.

China too has quite different strategic imperatives in the Indian Ocean as compared with the Pacific. The Pacific represents the central battleground for China as it seeks to expand its maritime territories, gain hegemony over surrounding states, and expel the US from the First Island Chain. As discussed in chapter 3 (China's future military presence in the Indian Ocean: interests and imperatives), China's imperatives in the Indian Ocean are more defensive and incremental: to secure its

crucial SLOCs over which energy and other trade is carried; to build new overland pathways to the ocean through Pakistan and Myanmar (which provide substantial direct connections between Chinese territory and the Indian Ocean for the first time in history); and to gain political and economic influence among regional states. Overall, the Indian Ocean is a secondary theatre for China as compared with the Pacific, and Beijing's likely strategic preference would be for strategic competition there to remain relatively muted and not place excessive demands on China's defence resources. That said, there is a lively debate about whether China's long-term objectives in the Indian Ocean tend more to hegemony. Many states – especially Indian Ocean littoral powers such as Australia – have obvious stakes in watching this closely.

The Indian Ocean is also a secondary theatre for the US. The Pacific is undoubtedly the central zone in its contest with China for global pre-eminence. To be sure, the US has important interests in the Indian Ocean, including in maintaining adequate security and stability in the Gulf. As discussed in chapter 1 (US naval strategy in the Indian Ocean), this means that, for Washington, the Indian Ocean is essentially an economy-of-force theatre. Its strategic preference is more or less to maintain the status quo, while seeing countries like India, and to some extent also Australia, gradually assuming a greater burden for maintaining regional security. Academic speculation that the US will shift to devoting major forces to the Indian Ocean, at the expense of the Pacific, is likely to remain just that.[11]

There are also some significant distinctions between the Pacific and Indian Oceans for some of the middle players. Australia, which straddles the Pacific and Indian Oceans, has traditionally paid far more attention to the Pacific, as noted in chapter 9 (Australia: as an active middle power in the Indian Ocean). It is an open question as to how much this will change, with Canberra stepping up intense competition with China as a security and development partner to South Pacific nations, even while its Indian Ocean naval base is a locus for the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine program. Indonesia, which also straddles the two oceans, continues to be focused on its immediate neighbourhood of Southeast Asia to the virtual exclusion of the Indian Ocean – see chapter 12 (Indonesia's ambivalence as an Indian Ocean power).

Other middle power players that are important, or potentially important, for the Indian Ocean include France (discussed in chapter 10 – The Indian Ocean in France's Indo-Pacific pivot), which has had a longstanding security role in the Indian Ocean, one it is reinterpreting as part of a broader commitment to the Indo-Pacific. In contrast, South Africa (chapter 11 – South Africa: balancing priorities and relationships in the Indian Ocean) struggles to define its role in the Indian Ocean as against its current focus on the African continent. Other emerging players include Bangladesh, which has begun, however fitfully, to lift its perspectives beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Extra-regional players such as Japan, the UK and

the European Union (collectively but also some of its key member states) also have important roles to play in the Indian Ocean.

All this means that while there are substantial convergences in strategic dynamics between the Indian and Pacific Oceans – often centred around shared concerns about China – there are also substantial differences. But while the Indian Ocean might become a more complex and multipolar strategic environment compared with the Pacific, the most powerful states also have good reasons to maintain a reasonable level of strategic stability there.

There are several consequences of all this for understanding the Indian Ocean. One is that the India-China strategic relationship may follow a somewhat different trajectory than the US-China strategic relationship and there is potential for a major conflict to occur between those powers without directly involving the US. Second, there are potential uncertainties about the US strategic commitment to the Indian Ocean. It may be unlikely that the US will greatly diminish or remove its already limited defence resources in the Indian Ocean. All the same, it remains doubtful that American force presence will expand to keep pace with growing Chinese activity, compelling India and Australia to make a significant step up in their own capabilities. While the AUKUS submarine arrangement with Australia and the UK will likely see a phase of rotations of US Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) operating out of Western Australia, this will mainly be about preparing Australia for its own SSN program and contributing to deterrence in East Asia, rather than broadly providing for Indian Ocean security.

Third is the growing need of many countries to rely more heavily on India as a regional security provider. This may give some countries considerable interests in the expansion of India's military capabilities and, just as importantly, its political willingness to pursue a greater security role in the Indian Ocean.

A fourth consequence involves the future shape of regional governance arrangements. Many may be cautious about suggestions to further extend ASEAN-centric security institutions to the Indian Ocean, although it is worth noting that the East Asia Summit – the premier of those arrangements – included India from its founding in 2005. Even so, there may be good reasons to find a way to help Indian Ocean institutions better reflect the legitimate interests of major East Asian states and other extra-regional stakeholders such as key European states. China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean has considerable potential to disrupt regional relationships and groupings.

Different strategic dynamics are accompanied by dissonances in the maritime security challenges faced by Pacific and Indian Ocean states. To be sure, there are many similarities, for example, the challenges of climate change, environmental

degradation and unsustainable exploitation of fish stocks. However, there are also distinct problems in each ocean neighbourhood.

In the Indian Ocean, there are highly contentious disputes over land borders, including between India-Pakistan and India-China that could (and do) lead to limited land-based conflicts between those countries. But there is less cause for concern over maritime-based interstate conflicts. In the Western Pacific, China's maritime claims in the South and East China Seas (not to mention its assertion of authority over Taiwan) could easily lead to major conflicts at sea. While several maritime boundary disputes exist in the Indian Ocean, there is a greater practice of resolving them through bilateral negotiation or arbitration; a success story for the vision of an international rules-based order. And for all China's concerns over its security in the Indian Ocean, and growing projection of military power, it does not make territorial claims there.

In practice the principal maritime security concerns of Indian Ocean states – especially the many small ones – involve non-state or transnational security threats including illegal fishing, shipping accidents, smuggling of drugs, people, and weapons, violent extremism and piracy (although the latter has largely receded compared with a decade ago). To a considerable extent these threats arise because of poor maritime governance. Most littoral states simply do not have the capabilities to govern waters in their own jurisdiction, let alone international waters.

This means that the majority of Indian Ocean littoral states are much more concerned about local maritime security issues than, say, the potential for major power conflict. Among other things, this means that efforts by countries to engage in the region need to be strongly focused on these transnational security issues.

The Indian Ocean's strategic future as part of the Indo-Pacific

While the strategic future of the Indian Ocean remains uncertain, it is evident that it is becoming a much more complex, congested, and contested strategic space. A key factor in this is the changing dynamics among major powers, including a relative decline in US military dominance, the emergence of India as a major regional power, and China's growing economic and military presence. This transition in the relative strengths of the major powers is likely to produce a more multipolar region than seen before in the modern era, with a much greater level of strategic competition.

There are many implications of a more multipolar balance of power for the region. A more multipolar Indian Ocean, involving the interaction of several major powers, could easily produce outcomes that may look quite different from the decades of relative stability under a *Pax Americana*. These include long-running strategic instability and contest or some new form of dynamic stability.

Importantly, a multipolar region may also mean that the region's resident middle powers including Australia, France, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and South Africa, as well as extra-regional players such as Japan, the UK and Russia will likely play a greater role than in the past, pursuing their own interests either alone or in coalition with others. Indeed, a web of relationships among middle powers that transcend traditional strategic postures could become a significant force for stability in the region, partly mitigating strategic competition among the major powers and helping to build resilience among the smaller powers.

Smaller or relatively weaker states will also be significantly affected by a changing balance of power. They may find it difficult to escape the impact of strategic competition or instability. The less fortunate may be suborned or become the objects of major power competition, while the more fortunate may retain sufficient agency to pursue their own interests. There will be a temptation among some to seek to play major powers off against each other, which may not always end well.

Throughout history, the Indian Ocean has been a highway of connectivity among diverse economies and civilisations. It is, in effect, a global ocean. It is fitting, therefore, that the management of a multipolar strategic environment in the Indian Ocean could provide lessons for global order in decades ahead.

Notes: conclusion

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Index

Abe, Shinzo 11, 272, 275
Africa
(AFRICOM) 19, 21, 25, 90
African Union (AU) 193, 195–196, 240
China 201–202, 263
Chinese investments 7
Chinese nationals 7
Comoros 20, 141, 178–180, 200, 229
Ethiopia 10, 276
French Indo-Pacific 177–178
IOR presence 95, 174
Kenya 10, 145, 276
Madagascar 141, 178–181, 200, 229, 265
Mauritius 11, 12, 20, 95, 195–196, 229–231, 235–236, 237, 238–239, 240, 243n21, 243n30
Mozambique 141, 177, 180, 182, 192, 198–200, 215, 259
Russia 201–202
Rwanda 199
space activities 101
Tanzania 10, 199, 276
. *see also* Djibouti; Seychelles; South Africa
Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 (AIMS2050) 196–197
Albanese, Anthony 160, 162–163, 183
Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC) 115–117, 118, 126n33
Andaman region
air operations 112–113
Australia 78
geopolitics 12
India 40, 58, 69n59, 78, 81, 121, 147
Indonesia 81, 218
maritime activity 140
SITMEX naval exercise 213
Thailand 105n1, 118
anti-piracy operations
China 5, 35, 147, 201, 264
France 95
MOSI 201–202
OXIDE 180
United Nations 146
Anwar, Dewi Fortuna (Khaidir-Anwar) 210–212
Arabian Gulf. *see* Persian Gulf
Arabian Sea 141
Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) 251–252
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) 274
Asia-Pacific region
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) 167
Australia 156, 274
boundaries 274–275
China 121
France 174
Japan 274
regional definition xv, 272–273
rivalry 212
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) 274
Australia 156–157, 164
China 174–175
economies 274
Indian Ocean 40, 278
Indonesia 209, 212, 214–215, 219–220
Indo-Pacific region 218, 272
Quad 41
South China Sea 174–175
United States 174
Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality 214
Assumption Island 236, 239, 264–265, 268n26
Atriandi Supriyanto, Ristian 220–221
AUKUS
Australia xvi, 160–161, 164, 277–278
France 164, 176
India 41
IOR presence 11
nuclear-powered submarines 3, 277
Quad 183

UK 83, 278
US 91, 149
Australia
Afghanistan 159
Africa 80, 167
air operations 75–78, 91, 97, 127–128, 130–132, 133–134, 166
ASEAN 156–157, 164
Asia-Pacific region 274
AUKUS xvi, 3, 10, 26, 83, 91, 149, 160–161, 164, 170n17, 277–278
AUSINDEX exercise 76, 81
Cambodia 168
China 74, 75, 127, 131, 155, 159–160, 162
climate policy 159
Cocos Islands 12, 163
counter piracy 157
COVID-19 75, 81, 159, 163
cultural exchanges xvi
cyber security 162
Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement 75
defence strategy 146, 156–157
disaster risk management xvi
East Timor 81, 144, 168
energy imports xv–xvi, 161–162
energy trade routes 80, 84, 155, 161–162
fisheries management xvi
foreign policy xv, 128, 156–157, 165
France xvi, 5, 81–83, 158, 164
global trade 161
humanitarian assistance 143, 157, 158–159, 163, 167–168
India xv–xvi, 4–5, 75–78, 92, 134, 155–158, 159, 161–162, 164, 166
Indian Ocean Rim Association xv, 167
Indonesia xvi, 5, 74, 134, 164, 226n71
Indo-Pacific region 76, 128, 141, 146, 155–156, 158–160, 165–168, 272, 277
intelligence collection 26, 75, 111, 133, 162
IOR presence 1, 10, 73, 78–80, 84, 130–131, 155–158, 160–161, 163–164, 167–168, 169n1, 208, 280
Japan 134, 164
Joint Declaration on Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific 75
KAKADU exercise 81
littoral regions 145
Malabar exercise 76, 164
Malaysia 74, 78, 164
Maldives 166
maritime forces 75–79, 81–82, 91, 143, 144–145, 148–149, 157, 160, 181, 213
maritime security 73–75, 78, 82–84
Melanesia 168
Middle East 79
military capabilities 80–81
Multi-domain operations (MDO) 134
Mutual Logistics Support Agreement 75
National Security College (NSC) iii, xvi
nuclear-powered submarines xvi, 83, 91, 149, 160, 277–278
Pacific island countries 134, 159–160
Papua New Guinea 163
partnerships 158–161, 163–164, 166, 175
Philippines 3–4
Quad xv, xvi, 3–5, 26, 76–77, 92, 157–159, 162, 167, 183
refugees 157, 161, 163
Singapore 134
Solomon Islands 168
South Asia xvi
South China Sea 78
South East Asia 78–79, 159–160
Southwest Pacific 79
space activities 127–128, 130–132, 134, 162
Sri Lanka xiii, 74, 78, 164, 166
Thailand 74
tourism xvi
trade routes 155, 162
trading partners 157
UK xvi, 79, 83, 164
unauthorised maritime arrivals 73–74
uranium sales 157
US xvi, 3–4, 26, 75, 79–80, 83, 91–92, 134, 163, 164, 165
Australia-France Initiative (AFINITI) 183

Bahrain 19
Bangladesh
air operations 94
China 6
economy xv
Indo-Pacific region 273
IOR presence 1, 10, 277, 280
maritime forces 94

Baruah, Darshana 43
Bashfield, Samuel vii
Bay of Bengal 40, 55, 58, 76, 82, 110, 112, 114, 117–118, 140–141, 143–144, 146–147, 149, 164
Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI)
  India 8
  Indonesia 215, 268n20
  Pakistan 7
  Sri Lanka 7, 250, 252
Biden administration 3, 17, 18, 147, 175, 183
Blaine, Mark vii
Brazil 194, 201
Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) 32, 190–194, 201–202, 253
Brewster, David vii–viii, 40, 169n1
Britain. *see* United Kingdom
Burke, Justin viii

Cabo Delgado region 199
Cambodia 59, 99, 103, 120
Chagos Archipelago 11, 20, 75, 83, 141, 178–179, 195, 237–238, 265
China
  A2AD framework 41
  Africa 35, 98, 263
  air operations 60, 97–99, 110, 112–114, 118–120, 124n18, 125n22, 129
  anti-piracy operations 5, 35, 54, 56, 60, 145, 146, 147, 201, 264
  artificial islands 103
  ASEAN countries 175
  Atlantic 22
  Bangladesh 6, 58
  bases 35–36, 52, 112, 118–120, 124n14, 130, 146, 263
  Bay of Bengal 58
  Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) 6, 35, 53–54, 61, 102, 107, 110, 120–121, 175, 212, 215, 233, 245, 268n20, 272
  BRICS 32, 190–194, 201–202, 253
  Buddhism policy 247
  Cambodia 59, 103, 120
  Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) 110
  citizens abroad 7, 53–54, 56, 61
  coercive strategies 51, 59, 61–62, 70n66, 74, 112, 119, 128, 130–131, 146, 162, 165
  Cold War 263
  constructive roles 27
  counterterrorism (CT) activities 57–58
  COVID-19 31–32, 249
  cyber activities 120, 130
  defence documents 35, 52–53
  Djibouti 5–8, 25, 36, 53–54, 56–57, 61–63, 69n61, 95, 97–99, 110, 118, 146, 166
  East China Sea 279
  Eastern Africa 36, 55
  economy 6, 7
  energy trade 38*table*, 39–40, 42, 48n54, 52, 60–61, 65n13
  energy trade routes 2, 5, 8, 40, 52, 61, 109, 141, 273, 277
  Europe 98
  exclusion 202
  First Island Chain 35, 112, 115, 148–149, 276
  GDP 37–*38*
  geo-strategic influences 166
  grey-zone activities 25
  Gulf of Aden 54, 56, 60
  Gulf of Oman 61
  Gulf of Thailand 58
  Gwadar 8, 57, 61, 63, 70n70, 103
  Hambantota 8, 103, 110
  humanitarian assistance 54, 56–57, 61–63, 98, 110, 119, 129, 146
  India 4, 7–9, 25, 32–34, 43–44, 58, 107, 112, 126n37, 231, 234, 264
  India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) 58
  Indonesia 32
  Indo-Pacific region 34–35, 272
  intelligence collection 36, 51, 55, 57–58, 61–63, 101, 103, 111, 113, 128, 146, 150
  international law 75, 174
  international military exercises 54–55
  IOR presence 1, 5–6, 36, 41, 44, 51, 52–55, 56, 97–99, 103, 107, 109, 121, 128–129, 130, 146, 148, 158, 162, 167, 194, 208, 212, 234, 273, 276–277
  Japan 32, 107, 175
  Karachi 61, 63
  Kyaukpyu 8
  Libya 54
  Malacca 39, 109
  Maldives 55, 59
  maritime forces 5–6, 21–22, 28, 32, 33,

35–38, 42, 45n14, 52–54, 56, 58–60, 61–62, 97–99, 103, 107, 110, 118–120, 124n11, 125n22, 145, 147, 158, 174
Maritime Silk Road 6, 158, 161, 272
Mauritius 12, 55, 235
Middle East 98
military expansion 7, 22, 32, 53–54, 57, 62–63, 97–99, 110, 113, 128, 135n1, 147–148, 174, 263
Myanmar 6, 36, 58, 110
non-combat missions 56, 129
One Belt One Road 22
Pacific Ocean 7, 22, 25, 53, 97–98, 107, 148–149
Pakistan 6, 36, 55, 57, 111
People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) 37, 54, 97–99, 103, 110–113, 118, 120, 129
People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) 6, 35–36, 41, 43–44, 52–57, 58–62, 69n59, 70n62, 70n69, 97–99, 103, 109–114, 118, 120–121, 124n11, 145–151
People's Liberation Army (PLA) 9, 21, 32, 35, 51–63, 64n2, 67n38, 69n55, 70n70, 71n72, 97–99, 101, 103, 108, 110, 113–114, 118–-120, 125n22
People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) 113–114
The Philippines 32
polar regions 22
political expansion 7, 8
Port of Karachi 57
Quad 11, 41, 122
regional relationships 6, 12
Science of Military Strategy 53, 112
sea lines of communication (SLOCs) 277
Seychelles 55, 263–266
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 57
sinocentrism 110
South Asia 55
South China Sea (SCS) 18, 32, 74, 97, 103, 112, 114, 120, 174, 212, 245, 262, 279
South Korea 107
Southwest Pacific 159
space activities 101, 107, 111, 112, 113–114, 120
Sri Lanka 6, 7, 13, 58–59, 231, 233, 246, 247–248
Strait of Malacca 120, 141
submarines 76
Taiwan 3, 32, 59
Thailand 58
trade 37–*38*, 39, 202, 231–232, 235
trade routes 5, 74, 128, 182
US 21, 107, 230
USSR 230
Vietnam 32
West Asia 36
China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) 252
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) 6–7, 36, 39–40, 93, 110–111
choke points
Andaman Sea 140
Bay of Bengal 140
eastern Indian Ocean 60
Lombok strait 58
Southeast Asian archipelago 140
Sri Lanka 140
Strait of Hormuz 17, 141
Strait of Malacca 102, 140, 147
Sunda strait 58
climate change impacts 128, 144, 150, 163, 176–177, 179, 240, 265, 278–279
Cocos Islands 12, 78, 79, 115, 140, 163, 166
Cold War vii, 13, 36, 78, 230, 263
Colley, Christopher 147
Colombage, Jayanath 232
Comoros 20, 141, 178–180, 200, 229
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreements 75, 159, 211–212, 219
conflicts
China and India 108–109
commercial ships 141
Djibouti 25
Gulf War 119
Himalayas border region 5, 8, 45n9, 108–109, 147, 240
India-China border 32, 107
Kargil War 123n4
Sinhalese-Tamil 246
strategies 45n16
. *see also* terrorism
Corbett, Julian 34, 142
COVID-19 impacts
Australia 75, 81, 159, 163
China 31–32
Sri Lanka 13, 246
of Sri Lanka 249–250

COVID-19 vaccines
China 249
India 261
India-Sri Lanka 249
Seychelles 261
UAE 261
Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) xi, 164, 180

Dean, Peter J. viii
Diego Garcia 11, 12, 19–20, 75, 89–90, 96, 100, 115, 178, 195, 259, 262
disaster relief xvi, 4, 28, 53–54, 56, 94, 101, 110, 129, 139, 143–144, 176, 201
. *see also* humanitarian assistance
Dissanayake, Anura Kumara 235, 238, 253
Djibouti
China 5–8, 25, 36, 53–54, 56–57, 61–63, 69n61, 98–99, 110, 118, 146, 166
France 95, 176, 181–183
India 40, 115, 243n32
Japan 11, 97
US 19, 25, 259, 262
Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) 180, 189, 197–198

East Asia 274
Eastern Africa
economy xv, 211
IOR presence 10
terrorism 96, 268n17
energy trade routes 2, 5, 8, 40, 52, 61, 80, 84, 109, 140–141, 155, 161–162, 258, 273, 277
environment protection 103, 139, 161, 184, 209–210
. *see also* climate change impacts
Ethiopia 10, 276
European Maritime Awareness in the Straits of Hormuz initiative (EMASOH) 182
European Union (EU)
France 178
Indo-Pacific region 174–175
IOR presence 178
maritime project xi
naval force (NAVFOR) 199
piracy 173
Quad 183
training mission in Mozambique (EUTM) 180

Evans, Gareth 167

First Island Chain 35, 112, 115, 148–149, 276
fishing, illegal or unregulated 82, 139, 162, 176, 182, 184, 186n19, 199, 211, 214–215, 279
fishing vessels
Chinese 24, 58–59
Indian 138
Indonesian 210
Seychelles 261
Five Eyes intelligence sharing 24, 96, 104
France
Afghanistan 94
air operations 94, 181
Al Dhafra 95
American anti-Chinese coalition 183
Asia-Pacific region 174
AUKUS 164, 175, 176
Australia xvi, 5, 158–159, 175, 183–184
bases 181–182
counter piracy 95, 178, 180
Djibouti 95, 176, 181–183
Eparses islands 178, 180
EU support 178
EU training mission in Mozambique (EUTM) 180
Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) 178, 182
humanitarian assistance 175, 176
India 4–5, 78, 95, 158–159, 175, 179, 181, 183, 184, 243n32
Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) 178–179
Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) 94
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) 179
Indo-Pacific region 173, 174, 175–177, 181, 183–184
intelligence collection 111
IOR presence 1, 10, 82, 94–95, 178, 181–183, 184, 208, 212, 262, 277, 280
maritime forces 179, 181–182, 184
Mayotte 178
Mozambique 180
Mozambique Channel 180
nationals abroad 95
Pacific Ocean 95
partnerships 182–183, 184

Persian Gulf 94
Quad 183–184
Réunion 177
Seychelles 178
Singapore 95
South Africa 180
South China Sea 174, 181
Southern Africa 179
space activities 115–116
UAE 95
US 95
Freedom of Navigation (FON) program 18, 27
Friedman, B.A. 150
fuel. *see* energy

G20 193, 208, 212
Garuda Sheild 213
Germany 19, 38, 164, 174
Gilday, Mike 22, 23
Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) 209
Global South 194
Goldrick, James viii, 83–84, 85n1
Green, Michael J. 129
Gulf of Aden
competition and conflicts 141
piracy 145, 157, 211, 216
US 19
Gulf of Oman 18–19, 61
Hague Arbitral Tribunal (2016) 174
Hardy, Dennis viii–ix
Hawke, Bob 167
He, Zheng 35–36
Hu, Jintao 52, 263
Humanitarian and Disaster Response (HADR)
Cyclone Mora (2020) 143–144
Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami (2004) 143, 157
MH370 search (2013) 167–168
missing Malaysian airliner (2014) 158
humanitarian assistance
China 54, 56–57, 61–63, 98, 110, 129, 146
France 176
India 119, 139
Indonesia 219
Myanmar 143
Thailand 94
US 18, 101, 143
. *see also* disaster relief
Hunter, Peter ix

illegal fishing. *see* fishing, illegal or unregulated
India
air operations 75, 77–78, 91–92, 108, 111, 115–119, 120–121, 123n4, 147
allies and partners 41, 43, 75, 211–212, 234
Andaman and Nicobar Islands Command (ANC) 117–118, 126n33, 147, 192
Andaman Island 12, 40, 58, 115, 117, 121
Army 147
ASEAN 40, 274
Assumption Island 239
AUKUS 41
Australia xv–xvi, 92, 111, 162
bases 40–41, 115, 117–118, 183, 234
Bay of Bengal 40, 118
BRI projects 8
BRICS 32, 190–194, 201–202, 253
China 4, 7–9, 25, 32–34, 40–41, 43–44, 58, 59, 92, 107–109, 115, 126n37, 147, 177, 183, 268n25, 278–279
citizens abroad 119, 144
conflicts 5
COVID-19 261
Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement 75
Djibouti 40, 115, 243n32
economy xv
energy security 232
energy trade 38*table*, 39
energy trade routes 141
exclusive economic zone (EEZ) 18, 25
foreign policy 4–5, 36, 42, 43, 105n1, 108
France 4–5, 78, 91, 111, 115–116
GDP 37–*38*
geo-strategic advantages 40
humanitarian assistance 119, 139, 143
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) xv, 240
Indonesia 8, 81, 213, 218
Indo-Pacific region 166, 184, 272
Information Fusion Centre 76–77
intelligence collection 4, 32, 75, 111, 117, 138, 236
IOR presence 1, 109, 111, 117–118, 146, 147, 175, 194, 208, 212, 234, 237, 276, 278

land-based threats 9
Malabar activities 24, 76
Maldives 8, 109, 234
maritime forces 33, 43–44, 75–76, 91, 115–117, 121, 138, 143, 174, 183, 202, 212–213, 243n32
maritime strategies 33–34, 37, 38, 42, 43–44, 45n14, 75
Mauritius 8, 95, 236, 238–239
military budget 108
military capabilities 3, 4
military expansion 109, 149
Mutual Logistics Support Agreement 75
Myanmar 111
natural disaster response 144
Nicobar Island 12, 40, 58, 115
non-alignment mindset 77
nuclear strategy 42
Oman 8, 111
Pakistan 4, 33, 40, 108–109, 115, 268n25, 279
Quad 3–5, 11, 32, 40–41, 44, 76, 157, 181, 183–184
regional relationships 4, 12
Russia 264
SAARC 240
Seychelles 8, 239, 264–266
South China Sea 31, 43–44, 272
South Korea 111
space activities 115–116, 120–121
Sri Lanka 109, 111, 231–232, 249–250
Taiwan Strait 43
terrorism 138
trade xv, 37–*38*, 231–232
US 4, 20, 24, 90, 91, 105n1, 111, 264, 268n25
India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) 189–190, 192–193
Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) 178–180, 239–240
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)
aims 274
Australia xv, 167
France 179
India xv, 240
Indonesia 208, 211–212, 214, 220–221
Mauritius 240
membership 201, 273–274
South Africa 189–190, 193–194, 196–197, 201–202
Sri Lanka 253
US 23, 27
Indonesia
air operations 93
AOIP 215
ASEAN 209, 214
AUKUS 212
Australia xvi, 5, 93, 211–212, 219–220
Bali Process 208, 220
Belt and Road Initiative 268n20
China 213, 218
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement 211–212, 219
economy xv
energy security 211
foreign policy 220–221
G20 208
Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) 209, 211, 214
humanitarian assistance 216, 219
illegal fishing (IUU) 210–211, 214, 215
India 216, 218
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) 208, 211
Indo-Pacific region 211, 215, 218
IOR presence 1, 11, 207–208, 212–214, 215–218, 219–220, 224n41
Japan 218
Joint Declaration on Maritime Cooperation 219
Malaysia 93
Mandala system 220
Marine Policy Action plans 210
maritime forces 213, 215–218
Myanmar 220
narcotics trafficking 215
National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS) 216
naval bases 217map, 218
Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 207–208, 219
Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) 208, 219
partnerships 12, 191, 218
people smuggling 215
refugees 214, 215, 219
SAR 216
Singapore 216
South China Sea 213, 218
US 93, 218

Indonesia Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA) 213
Indonesian Ocean Policy (IOP) 209–210, 218
Indo-Pacific region 27, 90, 100, 141, 175, 183–184, 215, 272, 275–276
intelligence collection
  Australia 26, 111, 162
  China 36, 51, 55, 57–58, 61–63, 101, 103, 111, 113, 128, 146, 150
  Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) 180
  Five Eyes intelligence sharing 24, 96, 104
  France 111
  India 4, 32, 111, 117, 138, 236
  information warfare (IW) 133
  Japan 111
  MASE 180
  Russia 103
  Singapore 111
  South Africa 199
  South Korea 111
  US 24, 45n9, 71n73, 104, 111, 148, 165
International Monetary Fund (IMF)
  Sri Lanka 250–251, 253
  trade data 235
Iran
  Freedom of Navigation report (2020) 18
  Indian Ocean region 194
  US 80
Italy
  air operations 97
  Djibouti 95
  South China Sea 174

Japan
  air operations 96, 97
  Asia-Pacific region 274
  Djibouti 11, 95, 97
  Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy 275
  Humanitarian and Disaster Response (HADR) 143
  Indo-Pacific region 166, 272, 276
  intelligence collection 111
  IOR presence 1, 11, 97, 280
  Malabar activities 76
  maritime forces 143, 174, 181
  Quad 3–5, 11, 76–77, 97, 157, 183
  Seychelles 265
  South China Sea 97
  South Korea 3–4
  US 3–4
Joko, Widodo "Jokowi" 209, 211–212, 213, 217, 220

Kaplan, Robert D. 40
Keating, Paul 167
Keeling Islands. *see* Cocos Islands
Kenya
  economy 276
  IOR presence 10
  terrorism 145

LA PEROUSE exercise 181
Laksmana, Evan 220–221
Le Drian, Jean-Yves 174

Macron, Emmanuel 158, 161, 175, 177
Madagascar 141, 178–181, 200, 229, 265
Malabar activities 24, 27, 76, 157, 160, 164, 183
Malacca dilemma 39, 74, 109, 118
Malacca Strait. *see* Strait of Malacca
Malaysia 74, 78, 93, 94, 111–112, 141, 164, 168, 191, 219–220
Maldives
  China 231, 234–235, 237–238
  decolonisation 230
  domestic politics 233–234
  Freedom of Navigation report (2020) 18
  geographical location 229–231, 234–235
  India 231–235, 237–238
  Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) 239–240
  IOR presence 12
  Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 230
  South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) 240
  trade 232
  US 20, 23
maritime domain awareness (MDA) 58–59, 62, 111–112, 115, 117, 180, 184
maritime environment protection 103, 139, 155, 161, 184, 209–210
maritime security
  Africa 198
  illegal or unregulated fishing 82, 139, 162, 176, 182, 184, 186n19, 199, 211, 214–215, 279
  interoperability 200–201

Mozambique 198
narcotics trafficking 139, 180, 182, 197, 215, 279
Operation COPPER 199
Operation CORONA 199
people smuggling 74, 78, 119–120, 139, 155, 157, 161, 163, 199, 215, 220, 279
SADC Maritime Security Strategy 198
maritime security governance xiii
Matheswaran, M. ix
Mauritius
African Union (AU) 240
air operations 95
Chagos archipelago 11, 237
China 235
decolonisation 230
dependence 235
domestic politics 235–236, 243n30
foreign policy 238–239
geographical location 229–231, 235, 237
India 235–236
Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) 239
Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 230
SAARC 240
SADC 195–196
trade 235, 243n21
UK 20
US 12
McDougall, Derek ix
Medcalf, Rory 1
Meegoda, Malinda x
Menon, Shivshankar 235
Michel, James 260, 267n15
Modi, Narendra 218, 234, 264, 268n25
Morrison, Scott 83, 157, 159–160, 162–164
Mozambican Defence force 199
Mozambique 141, 177, 180, 182, 192, 198–200, 215, 259
Mozambique Channel 178, 180, 198–199, 259, 264–265
Muhammad Arif 215
Muizzu, Mohamed 234
Multi-domain operations (MDO) 132–134
Mulvaney, Brendan x
Myanmar
air operations 94
China 6, 36
humanitarian assistance 143
Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) 25
IOR presence 12
maritime forces 94
Rohingya refugees 214, 219–220
US 143

narcotics trafficking 139, 180, 182, 197, 215, 279
Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 207–208, 219, 230
North Arabian Sea 19
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) 22, 131, 173

One Belt One Road. *see* Belt and Road Initiatives

Pakistan
air operations 92–94, 111
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) 274
Central Command (CENTCOM) 25
China 6, 55, 93, 99, 111
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) 6–7, 36, 39–40, 93, 110–111
Chinese nationals 7
Freedom of Navigation report (2020) 18
Gwadar 93
India 4, 93–94
maritime forces 80, 92–93
US 93–94
Panditaratne, Dinusha x
Papua New Guinea 163, 177
Paris Agreement (2015) 175
Peltier, Chad 129
people smuggling 74, 78, 119–120, 139, 155, 157, 161, 163, 199, 215, 220, 279 . *see also* refugees
Péron-Doise, Marianne x–xi
Persian Gulf
Combined Task Forces 80
French interests 82, 94–95, 181–183, 277
Indian vulnerability 39
littoral states 141
US forces 2–3, 19, 148
petroleum trade. *see* energy
Philippines 3–4, 32, 119
piracy
anti-piracy operations 5, 35, 38, 95, 146, 147, 180, 201–202, 264

Celebes Sea 215
Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) 173
Contact Group off the Coast of Somalia 262
Contract Group on Illicit Activities (CGIMA) 186n27
east African region 198
EU 173
French EEZ 182
Gulf of Aden 145, 157, 211, 216
IOR presence 145
NATO 173
off the Horn of Africa 178
Operation COPPER 198–199
OXIDE exercise 180
SADC Maritime Security Strategy 198
Somali 173
Somalia region 146, 180
Strait of Malacca 211
. *see also* anti-piracy operations
Portugal 180

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)
AUKUS 183
Australia xv, xvi, 3–4, 26, 76–77, 92, 157, 159, 162, 167, 183
China 11, 122
core group 157
EU 183
France 183–184
India 4–5, 11, 32, 40–41, 44, 76, 157, 181, 183
Japan 3–4, 11, 76–77, 97, 157, 183
Malabar activities 183
Philippines 3
priorities 3–5
revival 158
space activities 116
US 3–4, 24, 27, 76–77, 102, 147, 155, 165

Raja Mohan, C. 141
Rajapaksa, Gotabaya 232–233, 238, 250
Rajapaksa, Mahinda 248
Ramkalawan, Wavel 237, 264–265
Rawat, Bipin 123n3
Red Sea 18, 19, 39, 80, 96, 141, 192, 194
refugees
Australian outlook 220
Indonesia 215
Indonesian outlook 215, 220
Rohingya refugees 214, 219–220
. *see also* people smuggling
René, France Albert 259
Réunion Island 19, 94–95, 115, 140–141, 175, 177–179, 181–183, 201
Russia
air operations 96–97
arms sales 12
bases 96
BRICS 32, 190–194, 201–202, 253
India 11
Indo-Pacific region 276
intelligence collection 103
IOR presence 1, 11–12, 103, 208, 212, 280
Japan 96–97
maritime forces 96, 174
Pakistan 11
South Asia 11
Ukraine 22
US 12
. *see also* USSR
Rwanda 199

SADC Maritime Security Strategy 195–196, 198, 199, 200
Saha, Premesha xi
Samaranayake, Nilanthi xi
Sambhi, Natalie xi–xii
sea lines of communication (SLOCs) 8, 58, 109, 112, 115, 275–277
security threats
illegal or unregulated fishing 82, 139, 162, 176, 182, 184, 186n19, 199, 211, 214–215, 279
narcotics trafficking 139, 180, 182, 197, 215, 279
people smuggling 74, 78, 119–120, 139, 155, 157, 161, 163, 199, 215, 220, 279. *see also* refugees
shipping accidents 25, 279
terrorism 18, 137–139, 141, 145, 180, 192, 268n17, 279
weapons smuggling 139, 279
Seychelles
African Union (AU) 240
Blue Economy 260
China 260–264, 268n18
Contact Group off the Coast of Somalia 262
COVID-19 261

decolonisation 230
dependence 235
domestic politics 235–236, 260
fishing and tourism 261–262
fishing industry 267n6
foreign policy 239, 257, 260–261
geographical location 229–231, 235, 237, 257–259
India 261–262
Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) 239
Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 230
piracy 261–262
Russia 268n18
trade 235, 267n6
UAE 259–261
US 23, 259
USSR 259
Shrikhande, Sudarshan xii, 84
SIGLA xiii
Singapore
air operations 93
France 95
intelligence collection 111
maritime forces 212–213
partnerships 191
US 93
SITMEX naval exercise 212–213
Somalia 52, 56
South Africa
African Union (AU) 192, 195–196
Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 (AIMS2050) 196
air operations 95
anti-piracy operations 180
Atlantic Ocean 192
Blue Economy 191, 194
BRICS 32, 190–194, 201–202, 253
China 201
Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) 192–194
Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) 189, 197–198
foreign policy 189, 192–193, 194–197, 201–202
France 195
G20 192
hydrography 200
India 202
India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA-MAR) 201
India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) 189, 192
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) 189, 196–197, 201–202
intelligence collection 199
International Civil Aviation Organisation 200
INTEROP EAST 200
IOR presence 1, 10, 95, 188–192, 194–196, 280
maritime forces 198–201, 202
maritime interests 192, 200
MDA 199–200
MOSI 201
Operation COPPER 198–199
partnerships 194–198, 200, 202
Russia 201
southern Africa 190
trade 192, 202
UN 192
US 195
South Asia
Australia xvi
economy 211
South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) 240
South China Sea
ASEAN 174–175
Australia 78
China 18, 32, 74, 97, 174, 245, 262
FON program 18
France 174
Germany 174
Hague ruling 174
India 31, 43–44, 272
Indonesia 213, 218
Italy 174
Japan 97
Spain 174
Thailand 81
South Korea 3–4, 97, 111
Southeast Asia 164, 211
Southern Africa 179–180, 194, 196–197
Spain 97, 174
Sri Lanka
air operations 94
Australia relations xiii
Belt and Road Initiative 250, 252
BRICS 253

China 6, 7, 13, 99, 231–233, 235, 237–238, 246, 248, 250–251
COVID-19 13, 246, 249–250
decolonisation 230
domestic politics 233, 247–248, 253
foreign debt 232–233, 249–251
foreign policy 245–247, 251–252
geographical location 229–231, 234–235
Hambantota 249
humanitarian assistance 119
independence 246
India 233–235, 237–238, 252
Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) 239–240
IOR presence 12, 245, 248
maritime forces 94
Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 230, 246, 250, 252–253
Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism 247–248
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) 240
taxation 250
trade 231–232
Trump presidency xiii
UK 246
Strait of Malacca 5, 39, 42, 58, 78, 102–103, 112–113, 120, 140–141, 147, 211
Supriyanto, Ristian Atriandi 220–221
Syria 96

Taiwan 3
Taneja, Pradeep ix, xii
Tanham, George 123n7
Tanzania
economy 276
IOR presence 10
Mozambican Defence force 199
terrorism
Al-Shabaab 145
Houthi attacks 18
Houthi rebels 141, 192
Islamic 268n17
jihadist insurgency 180
Sunni Islamic extremist organisation (26/11) 137–139, 141
Thailand 81, 94, 191, 220, 232
trade routes
China 5
Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 18
France 181
Freedom of Navigation (FON) program 18
international rules 17
littoral regions 140–141
Mozambique Channel 264
Persian Gulf 182
Red Sea 192
seaborne oil trade 140
Seychelles 258
shipping numbers 39, 140
Strait of Hormuz 17, 182
Trump, Donald 262
Trump presidency xiii, 175
Turnbull, Malcolm 157–159, 161

United Arab Emirates (UAE) 95, 111, 183, 259–261
United Kingdom
air operations 96
AUKUS 3, 11, 83, 278
Australia xvi, 11
British Indian Army 108
Chagos archipelago 83, 179
Diego Garcia 96
Indo-Pacific region 164
IOR presence 1, 11, 262, 280
maritime forces 96, 108
Mauritius 11, 20, 83, 179, 195
military expansion 96
partnerships 175
UK-Mauritius agreement (2024) 237
US 11, 96
United Nations
anti-piracy operations 146
Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 18
DCoc/JA 197–198
High Commissioner for Refugees 220
IOR presence 95
Organisation on Drugs and Crime 197–198
peace keeping 144–145
UN Security Council 184
United States
Afghanistan 3, 100, 145, 147
Africa Command (AFRICOM) 19
air operations 92, 96, 97, 100–101, 102
American Samoa 20
Arctic 21, 27
ASEAN 174

Asia policy 18
Atlantic 21–22, 27
AUKUS 3, 24, 26–27, 91, 149
Australia xvi, 3–4, 26, 79–80, 149
Bahrain 17, 19
Bangladesh 20, 24
bases 11, 19, 27, 100, 103, 259, 262
Biden administration 3, 17, 18, 147, 175, 183
capacity building 27
Central Command (CENTCOM) 19, 21, 25, 90, 100
Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) 22
China 2, 16, 20, 21–22, 23–24, 27, 71n72, 71n73, 147, 175, 212–213
Comoros 20
Diego Garcia 11, 12, 19–20, 75
diplomatic actions 16, 27
disaster relief 144
Djibouti 19, 25, 95–96, 259, 262
energy economy 17
energy security 2, 17, 75
FON program 18, 27
Global Force Posture Review 147
Guam 20, 79
Gulf of Aden 19
Gulf of Oman 19
Humanitarian and Disaster Response (HADR) 143
humanitarian assistance 18, 101, 143
India 2–3, 4, 18, 20, 24, 27, 91–92, 105n1, 147, 156–157
Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) 23, 27
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) 23
Indonesia 102, 224n41
Indo-Pacific region 3, 20–22, 147–148, 215, 262, 272
intelligence collection 24, 45n9, 71n73, 104, 111, 148, 165
IOR presence 1–2, 15–18, 19, 25, 27, 99–102, 120, 148, 165, 208, 277–278
IORA 27
Iran 17–18, 80
Iraq 3, 100
Japan 3–4, 97
littoral regions 149
Logistics Group Western Pacific (COM-LOG WESTPAC) 19
Malabar activities 24, 27, 76
Maldives 20, 23–24, 103
maritime forces 16, 18, 21–23, 27, 91, 102, 139–140, 142, 143, 145, 148–149, 181, 183
Maritime forces Central Command (NAVCENT) 17–18, 19
Mauritius 20
Middle East 27, 75, 96, 100, 147, 272
military activities 27
National Security Strategy (2017) 17
National Strategy for the Arctic Region (2022) 22
North Arabian Sea 19
Operation Prosperity Guardian 18
Pacific theatre 7, 19, 20
partnerships 3, 19–20, 24, 26–27, 102–104, 128, 147, 174, 175, 183
Persian Gulf 2–3, 19, 277
Philippines 3–4
Quad 3–5, 24, 27, 76–77, 102, 147, 155, 165
Red Sea 19
RIMPAC exercise 81
Russia 16, 20
Seychelles 23, 262
Singapore 19, 102
South Korea 3–4
space activities 120
Sri Lanka 20, 24, 103
Syria 3, 100
Thailand 20, 105n2
Trump administration 2, 24
UK 19–20
US Africa Command (AFRICOM) 19, 21, 25, 90
US Central Command (CENTCOM) 19
USSR 213, 230
USSR 78
. *see also* Russia

Vietnam 191, 212
Vigo, Milan 139
Vrey, Francois xii–xiii

Waidyatilake, Barana xiii
White, Joshua T. xiii
Wickremesinghe, Ranil 232, 250

Xi, Jinping 32, 113–114, 121, 233, 263, 268n20, 273

The Indian Ocean is becoming a more complex, congested and contested strategic space than ever before. This involves a relative decline in the United States' military dominance, the emergence of India as a major regional power and China's growing economic and military presence. The interactions between these powers are likely to produce a more multipolar region than seen in the modern era, with a much greater level of strategic competition.

Cross Currents: The New Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean brings together leading analysts from Australia, India, US, France, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Seychelles to consider the future of the Indian Ocean. It examines the changing balance of military power, including the naval and air strategies of the major powers, as well as the changing roles of key resident middle players, and the consequences of these developments for the island states as they seek to maximise their agency in the face of great power competition. The volume then considers how we should understand Indian Ocean dynamics as part of the broader Indo-Pacific construct.

Cross Currents is an essential reference tool for those who wish to understand strategic developments in the Indian Ocean in the decades ahead.

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