

Geostrategic Competition in the Indian Ocean: The Great Game at Sea

Fatima Binte Zahid¹



i Source: Stimson Center

Introduction:

The Indian Ocean is one of the most important strategic waterways for global trade, security and geopolitics. It connects the East with the West stretching from the Strait of Malacca and the Western coast of Australia to the East to the Mozambique Channel in the West.² The region is home to some of the world's busiest chokepoints and shipping lanes, and it hosts a variety of strategic resources, including oil, natural gas, and minerals. With its geographic location between

¹ Fatima Binte Zahid is working as a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). Previously, she was a Teaching Assistant at the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). She completed her MSS and BSS (honors) in International Relations from BUP.

² Darshana M. Baruah, "What Is Happening in the Indian Ocean?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 03, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/03/what-is-happening-in-indian-ocean-pub-83948>.

Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, the Indian Ocean has become a crucial arena for global powers to jostle and exert their influence.³

The ongoing dynamic competition and expanding navalism among major powers headed by India, China and the United States to preserve their dominance and interest in the Indian Ocean is now called the ‘Great Game at Sea’.⁴ The term refers to the 19th-century rivalry between the British and Russian empires to control Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁵ Today, the Indian Ocean has become a similar arena where major powers such as the United States, China, and India compete for influence and resource access.

The Great Game at Sea is a dynamic and complex phenomenon requiring careful analysis and understanding to navigate effectively. As the competition for influence and access to resources in the Indian Ocean continues to intensify, it will likely to have significant implications for regional stability and global politics. This commentary will explore the key drivers of the competition in the Indian Ocean, the strategic interest of the three major powers, the future of the competition and the potential implications for Bangladesh.

Significance of the Indian Ocean:

The significance of the Indian Ocean lies in many factors, including economic interests, security concerns, and strategic positioning. It links the energy-rich nations of the Middle East and economically vibrant Asia. The region is home to some of the world’s fastest-growing economies, including India and China. These countries rely on the Indian Ocean for trade and resource access, making the region a vital economic lifeline. Additionally, it is a critical transit point for global trade and energy supplies. It is strategically important because its transportation routes account for more than 80% of the world’s seaborne oil and trade transit.⁶

Beyond economic interests, the Indian Ocean also poses significant security challenges for global powers. The region is home to a range of non-state actors, including pirates, smugglers, and

³ Baruah, “What Is Happening in the Indian Ocean?”.

⁴ Harry I. Hannah, “The Great Game Moves to Sea: Tripolar Competition in The Indian Ocean Region”, War on the Rocks, April 1, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-great-game-moves-to-sea-tripolar-competition-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>

⁵ “The Great Game”, The Ohio State University, 2023, <https://guides.osu.edu/c.php?g=300070&p=7043825>.

⁶ Albina Muratbekova, “Geostrategic Games in the Indian Ocean: The Case of the Maldives”, Eurasian Research Institute, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/geostrategic-games-in-the-indian-ocean-the-case-of-the-maldives/>.

maritime terrorist groups, who threaten the stability and security of the region.⁷ There is also a substantial military deployment and basing in the ocean too.

Given these economic and security concerns, major powers are increasingly asserting their influence in the Indian Ocean. For instance, China has pursued a strategy of building ports and infrastructure along the Indian Ocean littoral, known as the ‘Maritime Silk Road’, to extend its influence and access to resources.⁸ Meanwhile, the United States has maintained a significant naval presence in the region and has an Indo-Pacific strategy. India has the ‘Security and Growth for all the Region’ or ‘SAGAR’ framework, aimed at building ties with Southeast Asia and countering China's influence.⁹



⁷ “Security Challenges from Non-State actors in the Indian Ocean”, Observer Research Foundation, January 6, 2012, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/security-challenges-from-non-state-actors-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

⁸ Maninder Dabas, “Here Is All You Should Know About 'String of Pearls', China's Policy to Encircle India”, India Times, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/here-is-all-you-should-know-about-string-of-pearls-china-s-policy-to-encircle-india-324315.html>.

⁹ Hannah, “The Great Game Moves to Sea: Tripolar Competition in The Indian Ocean Region”.

Strategic interest of India in the Indian Ocean:

India has served as a resident power in the Indian Ocean region and has been deeply involved in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean for decades.¹⁰ It strives to play the prime role in Indian Ocean diplomacy through naval force establishment, trade and infrastructure development. The ‘SAGAR’ framework of the Modi government is an early Indian vision for the Indian Ocean.¹¹

The primary strategic interest of India in the Indian Ocean is to maintain maritime security in the region. The Indian Navy has been maintaining a strong presence in the Indian Ocean to ensure the safety of its waters from piracy, terrorism, and other non-traditional threats. As a regional power, India has been working closely with other countries in the region to coordinate efforts to combat maritime threats. India has also been instrumental in promoting the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which aims to strengthen regional cooperation and enhance regional security.

The Indian Ocean is home to some of the world’s largest oil and gas reserves, and India relies heavily on imports to meet its energy needs. It has been working to secure its energy supplies by investing in infrastructure, such as ports and pipelines, and developing partnerships with key energy-producing countries in the region. India has also been exploring renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels.

Indian economy is heavily dependent on international trade, and the Indian Ocean is a critical route for global commerce.¹² It has been investing heavily in port infrastructure, such as the Chabahar Port in Iran and the Duqm Port in Oman, to enhance its connectivity with other countries in the region. It is also working to improve trade relations with other Indian Ocean countries, such as Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Maldives, to boost economic growth and development.

The geopolitical preference of the small island states in the India Ocean, like the Maldives, can shape and balance the geostrategic rivalry among nations. The current President of Maldives has created the opportunity for India to re-establish its connections with the Maldives and balance China’s influence in the region.¹³ This has been a strategic victory for India. For India, Maldives

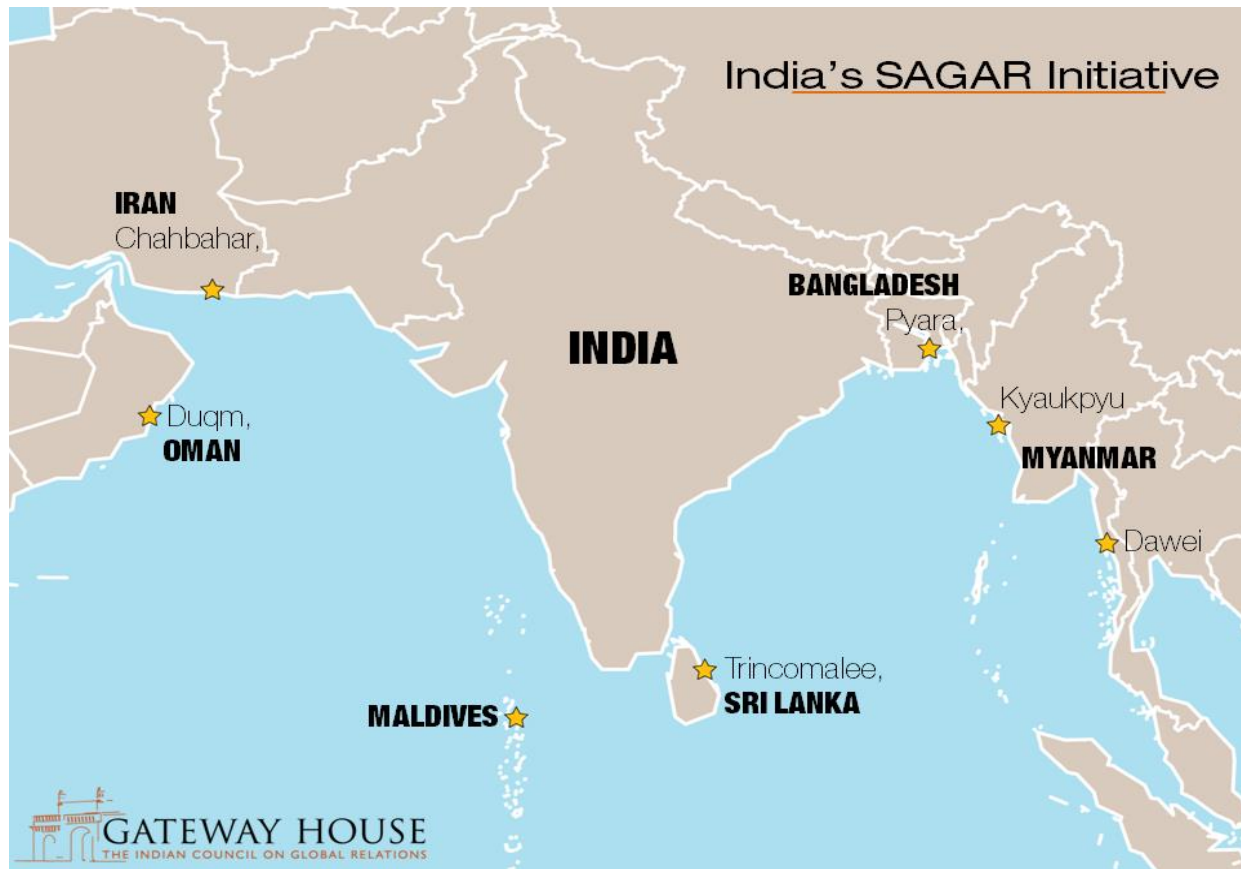
¹⁰ Radhey Tambi, “India’s Ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region”, South Asian Voices, January 23, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/indias-ambitions-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

¹¹ Hannah, “The Great Game Moves to Sea: Tripolar Competition in The Indian Ocean Region”.

¹² Dhruva Jaishankar, “Indian Ocean region: A pivot for India’s growth”, Brookings, September 12, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/indian-ocean-region-a-pivot-for-indias-growth/>.

¹³ Muratbekova, ‘Geostrategic Games in the Indian Ocean: The Case of the Maldives’.

falls within its sphere of influence and is highly interested in deterring Chinese influence in this island state.



Strategic interest of China in the Indian Ocean:

The main strategic interest of China in the Indian Ocean is to secure trade and oil transportation routes in the ocean.¹⁴ China relies heavily on energy resources from the Middle East and Africa, which are transported through the Indian Ocean. The majority of China's oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca, which connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, making it a vital chokepoint for China's energy security. As such, China has been looking to secure its sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies.¹⁵

The Indian Ocean is home to important shipping routes connecting Asia to Europe and Africa, making it a vital maritime trade route. As the world's largest trading nation, China has a strong

¹⁴ Paul Odhiambo, "China's Geostrategic Interests in the Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Kenya", *The African Review* 47, (2020): 377-391. doi:10.1163/1821889X-12340024.

¹⁵ Odhiambo, "China's Geostrategic Interests in the Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Kenya", 377-391.

interest in ensuring the security and stability of these shipping lanes. The Indian Ocean is also home to many resource-rich countries that offer significant economic opportunities for China. These factors have driven China to expand its economic and diplomatic ties in the region, particularly with countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.¹⁶

The Indian Ocean is also a key battleground in China's geopolitical rivalry with India. China and India have long been competing for influence in the region, and their rivalry has intensified in recent years. China has been building a strategic string of ports and military bases in the Indian Ocean region. This has raised concerns in India and other countries in the region about China's intentions and has prompted India to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean.

China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean has been primarily driven by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure and development project that aims to connect China to Europe, Africa, and the rest of Asia through a network of roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure.¹⁷ The BRI includes several key projects in the Indian Ocean region, such as the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, and the Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar. These ports are strategically located along key shipping lanes and offer China access to important economic and military assets in the region.

Strategic interest of the United States in the Indian Ocean:

The Indian Ocean is a crucial strategic region for the United States due to its significant economic, political, and military interests. The United States has been keenly interested in the region and has implemented various strategic policies to safeguard its interests. Successive US administrations have articulated the growing importance of the Indian Ocean for the security and economic strategy of the US.¹⁸

One of the main reasons for the United States' strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is the region's economic significance. The United States has been actively promoting trade and economic ties with the countries in the region, including India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives.

¹⁶ Odhiambo, "China's Geostrategic Interests in the Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Kenya", 377-391.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ "China-India Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: Issues for Congress", EveryCRSReport, April 20, 2018, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45194.html>.

The United States has a strategic interest in safeguarding the flow of oil through this region and has maintained a military presence in the Persian Gulf for several decades. In recent years, the United States has also worked closely with India, one of the world's largest energy consumers, to enhance its energy security and reduce its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. US interest in the Indian Ocean is in controlling and protecting the Strait of Malacca.¹⁹

The Indian Ocean connects Asia, Africa, and the Middle East and is home to several key countries, including India, China, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. These countries are of great strategic importance to the United States, in terms of their economic and military capabilities. The United States has been actively promoting regional stability and has worked to build strong partnerships with key countries in the region, including India, which is seen as a counterbalance to China's growing influence.

Furthermore, the Indian Ocean is critical for the United States' military interests. The region has several US military bases and provides a strategic gateway to the Asia-Pacific region. The United States has also been actively promoting maritime security in the region and has conducted several joint military exercises with its partners in the Indian Ocean, including India, Japan, Australia, and Singapore. The United States has also been working closely with its partners in the region to combat piracy and other maritime threats, which pose a significant risk to global security.

Future of the Great Game:

The strategic competition in the Indian Ocean region is rapidly changing, with significant geopolitical, economic, and military shifts likely to shape the strategic landscape in the coming years.

China's growing economic and military influence in the region will likely continue to be a key driver of strategic competition. China has made significant investments in the region, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to create a network of infrastructure and trade routes connecting China to Europe and Africa via the Indian Ocean. China has expanded its military presence in the region, establishing its first overseas military base in Djibouti and its growing naval capabilities. This has raised concerns among other major powers, including the

¹⁹Ji Guoxing, "SLOC Security in the Asia Pacific", Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2000, <https://dkiapecss.edu/Publications/Ocasional%20Papers/OPSloc.html>.

United States and India, who view China's expanding influence as a potential threat to their strategic interests.

India's growing strategic importance in the region will likely increase competition among major powers. India has emerged as a major player in the Indian Ocean in recent years, with its growing economy and military capabilities. India has been actively promoting regional stability and working closely with other major powers, including the United States, Japan, and Australia, to counterbalance China's growing influence. India has also been investing heavily in the development of its naval capabilities, including the construction of new ships and submarines, which is likely to enhance its strategic position in the region.

The United States' strategic presence in the region is likely to remain a key factor in the future of strategic competition. It has maintained a military presence in the region for several decades and has been actively engaged in promoting regional stability and combating terrorism and piracy. The United States has also been building strong partnerships with key countries in the region. However, the United States' focus on the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in the context of its competition with China, could potentially limit its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean in the future.

The future of strategic competition among the United States, China, and India in the Indian Ocean will likely be complex and dynamic. The region's strategic significance will remain high, and major powers will continue to invest in enhancing their strategic positions in the Indian Ocean. The challenge for policymakers will be to manage these competing interests while promoting regional stability and prosperity.

Implications for Bangladesh:

The strategic competition among the United States, China, and India in the Indian Ocean has significant implications for Bangladesh. Bangladesh is strategically located between India and Myanmar, making it an important regional trade and commerce transit point. Any disruption in the Indian Ocean due to strategic competition among major powers could impact Bangladesh's economic growth and development. For example, if tensions between India and China escalate, it could lead to a disruption in regional trade, which could have a negative impact on Bangladesh's economy.

Bangladesh's relationship with China is growing rapidly, with China becoming one of Bangladesh's largest trading partners and investors. However, Bangladesh is also keen to maintain strong ties with the United States and India, important defence and development assistance partners. Any tension between these major powers could put Bangladesh in a difficult position, requiring it to navigate between competing interests.

The strategic competition among major powers in the Indian Ocean could impact Bangladesh's security. Bangladesh has been dealing with the problem of terrorism and extremism, and any destabilization in the region could exacerbate this problem. Moreover, the presence of foreign militaries in the region, such as the Chinese military base in Djibouti, could have implications for Bangladesh's security and sovereignty.

Bangladesh will need to navigate between competing interests and manage potential risks and opportunities arising from the changing strategic landscape. The challenge for policymakers will be to balance Bangladesh's economic, security, and regional interests while promoting stability and cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion and Recommendation:

India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are multifaceted and complex. The country's focus on maritime security, energy security, economic development, and soft power projection has led to a sustained and active engagement in the region. As a rising power in the region, India's role in the Indian Ocean will likely continue to grow in the years to come. China's strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is driven by a combination of economic, security, and geopolitical factors. China's growing presence in the region has raised concerns among other regional powers, particularly India and the United States. The United States has implemented various strategic policies to safeguard its interests in the region, including promoting trade and economic ties, enhancing energy security, building strong partnerships with key countries, and promoting maritime security. With the region's growing importance, it is likely that the United States will continue to play a key role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Indian Ocean in the years to come. The implications of this competition are significant for countries in the region, including Bangladesh, which will need to navigate between competing interests and manage potential risks and opportunities arising from the changing strategic landscape.

Therefore, there is a need for a coordinated approach that promotes dialogue, transparency, and cooperation among major powers in the region. This approach should prioritize the maintenance of the rules-based order and respect for the sovereignty of all countries in the region. It should also promote inclusive economic growth and development, with a focus on building sustainable infrastructure and fostering trade and investment. Furthermore, there is a need to enhance regional security cooperation, including through joint exercises and capacity building, to address common challenges such as terrorism, piracy, and maritime security. By working together, major powers can address common challenges and build a more peaceful and prosperous future for the Indian Ocean region.