

## India in Indian Ocean: Emerging Strategic Dynamics and Power Game

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### Abstract

After the World War II, the US and India have the two dominant actors in the Indian Ocean. However, with the increasing Chinese inroads in Indian Ocean, and its littoral space in the recent decades, the strategic equations of the Indian Ocean have changed beyond imagination. In 1990s, China came with the string of pearls strategy, moved ahead to deploy her naval forces in 2007 in the name of fighting piracy, and now launched her ambitious BRI project in 2013 across Indian Ocean. China has also acquired new strategic assets in the region in the form of access to Pakistan's strategic Gwadar port and naval base in Djibouti. Perhaps, India, which considers Indian Ocean as her backyard, is the most affected nation due to these developments. India's security, trade and other vital economic interests are contingent on her credible presence and influence in the Indian Ocean. This paper seeks to analyze the nature of strategic competition or even rivalry between India and China and the role of the US in this emerging strategic situation. It also seeks to outline India's options including modernization and restructuring of her naval forces, and emerging partnership with her neighbours as well the US and other powers in the entire Indo-pacific Ocean. The idea of Indo-pacific has also linked the fate of two Oceans-the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. India needs to dovetail her maritime strategy with the notion of Indo-Pacific to evolve a broad coalition of forces to balance emerging and assertive China to protect her vital interests.

**Keywords:** Strategic Competition; Indo-Pacific; Maritime Strategy; String of Pearls; Strategic Partnership

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### Introduction

#### *India and the Indian Ocean*

The Indian Ocean has been an integral part of history and culture of its littoral states and beyond. It evokes the images of Samudramanathan, ancient trade routes, European colonialism, flow of people, culture, goods and energy across all sides of globe, Diego Garcia and the US, pirates of Somalia Coast

and Malacca Strait, String of Pearls encircling India, China's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Route, Japan's Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and of course Indian naval ships keeping watch on the entire maritime domain, which houses these images. These images reveal the history, the geographical reach and the strategic significance of Indian Ocean. The mythological notion of Sumdramanathan carries the image of rich resources as well as the potential for conflict. Indian Ocean has been closely linked with India's security, prosperity and connectivity with external world. Though India considers Indian Ocean as her backyard, she has always faced challenges to her preeminence from powerful nations- Britain in colonial period, the US in cold war era and China in post-cold war era. This research paper is an attempt to analyze India's contemporary stakes and strategy in the Indian Ocean and the interests and strategies of other major powers like China and the U S. Though India has primary focus on Indian Ocean, the emerging geopolitics of 'Indo-Pacific' brings

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all the major players from US, China, Japan, India, Russia, Australia and now France and Britain on the same chessboard along with their interests and strategies. It also reviews the changing geopolitics of Indian Ocean under the new concept of 'Indo-Pacific' and examines how India navigates her course to protect her vital interest in coming decades of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Indian Ocean surface area of 73,427,000 sq km, it is the third largest ocean in the world and covers 20 percent of the total oceanic water. The Waves rising in this ocean reach to 40 countries and up to 40 percent of the world's population. It joins the Atlantic Ocean in the South-West and the Pacific Ocean in the East. Its main seas are: Gulf of Aden, Andaman Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Great Australian Bight, Gulf of Mannar, Mozambique Channel, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Red Sea and other water bodies. Out of its four Major Choke points are: Bab el Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz are located in the West; Palk Strait in the South; and Lombok Strait and Malacca Strait in the East. It joins the Mediterranean Sea via Gulf of Aden, Bab el Mandeb, Red Sea and Suez Canal. Indian Ocean joins the Pacific Ocean through a narrow Malacca Strait in the East.

A significant share of international trade passes through the sea lanes of the IOR. Indian Ocean is the major trade route linking Europe and America with Middle East, Africa and East Asia. It is the major trade route for petroleum products of Persian Gulf and Indonesia. Robert Kaplan (2011: 07) accounts that the Indian Ocean rim land from the Middle East to the Pacific accounts for 50 percent of the container traffic and 70 percent of the traffic of petroleum products for the entire world. He says that India is as poised to become the world's third largest oil importer, after China and the US, with over 90 percent of its oil transiting the Indian Ocean. China is in the same company because over 85 percent of its imported oil already passes through the Indian Ocean. Amore recent account notes that the Indian Ocean shoulders the burden of two-third of the world's Oil Shipments, one-third of the world's bulk cargo and half of the world's container traffic. Three-fourths of the traffic passing through it and goes into other parts of the world (PIB: 2017). Another scholar Amrita Jash (2015) also notes that the growing economies of both China and India have increased the energy needs of both in last two decades. For China, 80 per cent of petroleum imports pass through the Indian Ocean into the Straits of Malacca, and for India, 75 per cent of its oil imports originates from

the Persian Gulf and passes through the Straits of Hormuz. In this wrestle for energy security, Beijing's 'Malacca dilemma' is matched with New Delhi's 'Hormuz Dilemma'. Thus, this quest for energy security has heightened the direct stakes of both the rising powers in maintaining the security and stability of the Indian Ocean region. Besides, the Indian Ocean is also a rich source of petroleum products, marine products and minerals. Nearly 40 percent production of the total offshore petroleum products comes from Indian Ocean. The prospects for *blue economy* in Indian Ocean are very high as often underlined by the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a group of Indian Ocean littoral states for regional cooperation.

The Indian Ocean Region has been always been useful area for the trade, security, marine resources to the littoral states as well as dominant world powers of the time. During colonial times, it served as a strategic resource for the establishment and maintenance of colonialism by European powers in South Asia and South East Asia. It was 19th century American Navy Officer and geo-strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who for the first time elaborated the maritime dimension of security and dominance. In his seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660-1763*, published in 1890 (Little Brown and Co.), he enunciated the concept of '*sea power*' which postulates that the countries with greater naval power will have greater worldwide impact and ability to exercise control over seas and territories. The book gives an account of the role of sea power during the 17th and 18th centuries and identifies the steps needed to achieve and support sea power with emphasis on having the most powerful fleet. His contention was that any country with command over sea, based on strategic naval operation in support of land forces, would have decisive advantage over others. This work has influenced the naval strategy of many countries in modern times (Harding: 2006). Regarding the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, Mahan stated: "Whoever attains maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean would be a prominent player on the international scene. Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This Ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters" (Jash: 2015).

Since the maritime journey of Vasco Da Gama to the Indian shores in 1498 till the end of World War II, it was the British Royal Navy, which was influential operator in the Indian Ocean, with minor challenge from other colonial powers. After the War, British

naval presence in the Indian Ocean diminished considerably and after the Suez Crisis (1956), the British relinquished his naval responsibilities to the east of Suez. This created a power vacuum which was filled by the US navy with its bases in Diego Garcia in Indian Ocean supported by the fifth fleet in Bahrain and sixth fleet in the East located in Japan. Thus, the US navy has emerged as the sole dominant sea power in the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific Ocean after the World War II. During the cold war era, the US used her sea power in the Indian Ocean to advance her strategic interests in the region. The US mobilized her naval forces in 1961 in Indian Ocean in support of India during the Indo-China war 1962 and again in 1971 in support of Pakistan during Indo-Pak war. During the cold war period, the US, as a resident power, denied equal influence to other powers like the Soviet Union in the IOR and Pacific Ocean. The US still wants to maintain her position as the status-quoist power in the Indo-Pacific region in the face of rising Chinese challenge in the post-cold war era.

#### *Indian Ocean Region: Changing Strategic Dynamics*

In the Post-cold war period, the strategic dynamics of Indian Ocean has changed considerably because of persistent efforts by new players-China and India to gain strategic influence in the IOR. These efforts are the result of their perceived or real strategic interests or fears in the IOR. While the US is still a predominant position in Indo-Pacific, the new strategic developments may prompt her to redesign her strategy and moves to maintain her preeminence in the region. Whatever the shape the redesign of such strategy may take, its underlined assumption would be to ensure that the emerging powers also develop a stake in the maintenance of existing global economic and political order in the region. Thus, the IOR or Indo-Pacific and its changing strategic dynamics hold crucial importance for its three key players: China, India and the US. The notion of Indo-Pacific connotes that the fate of the two Oceans and their stake holders is interlinked in the present age of globalization and trade driven growth process. American scholar Robert Kaplan (2011) predicted that the Greater Indian Ocean stretching from Horn of Africa to Indonesian archipelago will be the centre of the global conflicts because most of the international business supply will be conducted through this route. He further argues that it is here that 21st century power dynamics will be revealed as the interests and influence of region's three key players China, India and United States are beginning to

overlap and intersect. However, in recent years some other players like Australia, Japan, U K, and France have evinced keen interest in the affairs of IOR. The issues like the regional security, freedom of navigation, peaceful settlements of maritime disputes, emergence of new challenges like terrorism and piracy, and power projection by the actors are dominating the strategic discourse among major players. As global economic power shifts from Europe to Asia, the 'Indo-Pacific' is likely to emerge as a symbol of global strategic configurations.

### **Indian Maritime Strategy and Interests**

#### *Indian Stakes in the IOR*

Among all the contemporary powers, no one is more critically dependent on Indian Ocean than India for her trade, energy supply, security and development. India's quintessential maritime character and vital geo-strategic location are twin factors that have defined her growth as a nation and evolution as a cosmopolitan civilization. Her prominent peninsular orientation and flanking island chains overlook strategic sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, linking her security and prosperity inextricably to the seas (Indian Navy: 2015). India's entire sea-bound trade passes through Indian Ocean. India is dependent on external sources for two-third of her energy requirement and all of this comes through Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean is crucial for India's security as she is surrounded three sides by the Ocean and has small island territories on both sides. Keeping in view these factors, India, after independence, developed her naval forces, supported a rule based order, and opposed the presence of external powers in and militarization of Indian Ocean for the peace and stability in the region. In view of newly established US Naval base in Diego Garcia, India demanded in early 1970s that Indian Ocean should be declared as a 'zone of peace'. Though, Indian demand was not heeded by the super powers, nevertheless it underlines India's concern and approach to address the security challenges in the Indian Ocean. This was largely the Indian position on the Indian Ocean during the cold war, but India's interest and security dynamics has changed in the post-cold war period.

India has adopted economic liberalization policy in 1991 to integrate her economy with global economy. India's liberalized economy has scored an impressive growth rate of 7-8 percent in last 20 years or so. It has led to the expansion of her global

interests. India has become the third largest global economy in terms of PPP after the US and China. It is now counted as one of the emerging economies. She also cannot maintain the momentum of her economic growth without protecting her overseas trade, investment and energy flows. Similarly, the economic and military rise of China, her strategic forays in the Indian Ocean since 1990s, and her all weather alliance with Pakistan have compounded the strategic salience of the Indian Ocean. The rise of terrorism through sea routes, incidents of piracy, drug trafficking etc have also raised the new security concerns. These factors have added new dimension to India's strategic interests in IOR, besides her conventional concerns. Briefly India has the following strategic interests in the IOR:

1. To ensure a credible naval security of mainland and her islands territories (Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands) from conventional as well as non-conventional security threats. Indian peninsula surrounded from three sides by Indian Ocean has 7516 kms long maritime boundary, about 1300 small islands, and about 25 lakh square kilometers of Exclusive Economic Zone, to be defended. This geo-strategic location of India is both a sense of positional strength as well as source of potential security threat. Neither the US nor the China has this type of existential security threat emanating from Indian Ocean.

2. To ensure the safety and security of Sea Lanes Of Communication (SLOC) in Indian Ocean and its choke points for her trade and supply of energy resources. Not surprisingly, over 90 percent by volume and 70 percent by value of her external trade even today is transacted by sea (Indian Navy: 2015).

India cannot sustain her economic rise without the safe and adequate supply of energy resources like oil and gas.

3. To ensure the exploration and sustainable harnessing of marine resources in the IOR. India has evinced keen interest in the development of Ocean based economy, which is known as blue economy.

4. To restrict undue influence of external powers in the IOR; which is likely to prove detrimental to India's strategic interests. India finds rising Chinese influence in the IOR as against her strategic interests. India considers IOR as her backyard crucial to her security and other strategic interests.

### *India's Maritime Strategy*

In view of her economic interests and increasing Chinese presence and assertion in Indo-Pacific, India has also reoriented her maritime strategy to protect her strategic interests in the region. Among others, the three factors- India's growing trade and energy requirements and Coastal security; China's increasing forays in the Indian Ocean Region, and Indo-US strategic partnership - have deep impact on India's evolving Indian Maritime Strategy, which became more proactive since the middle of last decade. In the post-cold war era, for the first time India unfolded a New Maritime Doctrine (Indian Navy: 2004) in 2004 which calls for an enhanced role for Indian naval forces in the Indian Ocean and beyond in view of her expanding economic and strategic interests. This enhanced role of the navy was also reiterated in the renewed maritime doctrine issues in 2009.

In order to respond to the changing strategic environment, India announced her first Maritime Military Strategy, titled as "*Freedom to Use Sea: India's Maritime Military Strategy*". The strategy intended to provide strategic and conventional deterrence and an overarching rationale for creation and utilization of maritime capabilities of the Indian Navy during peace, crisis and conflict (SCRIBD: 2018). However, the strategy was criticized for being status quo, suitable for peace times as it did not have any enemy in mind, and was more suited to sectional interests of Indian Navy (Singh: 2015). More importantly, there is a strong impression that India's maritime policy documents are meant principally to resolve peacetime crises, albeit in a way that preserves the Indian Navy's interests and regional standing in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)- the primary theatre of Indian naval operations. The 2008 sea-born terrorist attack in Mumbai, rising incidences of piracy and China's growing foothold further exposed its inability to cope with the new threats in the Ocean.

In order to deal with new challenges, a new Maritime Security Strategy was announced in October, 2015. The last decade has witnessed India's dependence on her maritime environment expanding substantially as her economic, military and technological strength grew, her global interactions widened and her national security imperatives and political interests stretched gradually beyond the Indian Ocean Region. More specifically, three factors are responsible for articulation of a new maritime security strategy: fast change in the regional and global geo-strategic conditions in view of the rising China and retreating

US; increasing complexity of traditional as well as non-traditional threats; and a clearer recognition in India about maritime security being a vital element of national progress and international engagement (Indian Navy: 2015).

The new strategy is named as '*Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*' and is more dynamic and focused in addressing emerging challenges in the Indian Ocean. The previous strategy did not take into consideration the changing geopolitical environment and its strategic implications on India's maritime interests. The 2015 maritime security strategy addresses this gap by complementing the evolving security dynamics in the Indian Ocean region and reflecting a bold Indian navy with a renewed outlook on India's maritime security needs. China's bold footprints in the Indian Ocean are well accounted in the new strategy. It carries a larger strategic angle than previous strategy and attempts to embody an Indian naval vision for the region for coming decades. The three key points that underpin the shift in India's naval strategy are: formal acknowledgement of the concept of 'Indo-Pacific' for the first time; navy's expanding areas of both primary and secondary interests; and increasing recognition of navy's Human Assistance Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. The strategy tries to build a network of regional cooperation to ensure peace and stability in India's areas of interest (Baruah: 2015). The three broad dimensions of India's maritime strategy are discussed:

1. *Enhanced Role and Capability of Indian Navy:* As per India's maritime doctrine, 2004, India navy will have enhanced capabilities to meet her new responsibilities. India unfolded a New Maritime Doctrine (Indian Navy: 2004) in 2004 which calls for enhanced role and capabilities of Indian naval forces in view of her expanding economic and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and beyond. According to current naval modernization plan India will increase its fleet size to 160 by the year 2020. The Maritime Doctrine calls for control of maritime choke points, islands and trade routes in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Bay of Bengal and further expanded to include the arc from Persian Gulf to Strait of Malacca within the legitimate maritime interests by 2025. Thus, it involves forward movement of Indian Naval forces in both Western and Eastern ends of IOR. In the West, Indian ships are deployed around Gulf of Aden to check the incidence of piracy. In the East, India has developed close strategic maritime partnership with Vietnam and Singapore.

India has launched the 'Indian Naval Indigenization Plan (INIP) 2015-2030,' which specified the need for locally developed, advanced systems for its platforms. The Navy's long-term plan spells out the need for 198 warships by 2027, out of which 120 warships should be "capital warships," which would include large, offensive combat platforms like aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes and submarines. Against this requirement, the Indian Navy has just 140 vessels today, of which barely half are capital warships (Raghuvansi: 2017). In fact, paucity of resources hampers India's naval modernization plan.

2. *Regional Maritime Collaboration:* India considers Indian Ocean as her backyard and any security threats to regional littoral states may also pose security threat to India. Accordingly India has focused evolving a regional cooperative mechanism for maritime security in IOR. India was instrumental in formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technological and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Both these regional groups were formed in 1997. The IOR-ARC is an association of 18 littoral states of Indian Ocean with vital stake in the maritime security. In its 13th Ministerial Conference held in Nov. 2013 in Perth, Australia it assigned important place to maritime security as an area of common interest to all members. Another multilateral regional initiative is Trilateral Cooperation in Maritime Security launched in 2011 by three countries-India Sri Lanka and Maldives. It focuses on strengthening cooperative approaches using modern technologies for capacity building of regional states to counter threats to maritime security in the region (Ghosh: 2014). The DOSTI (Friendship) and MILAN (engagement) joint naval regional exercises are part of this initiative. Yet another collaborative initiative of India, started in 2006 and known as 'Indian Ocean Naval Symposium' (IONS: 2014), is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues. In the process, it endeavors to generate a flow of information between naval professionals that would lead to common understanding and possibly cooperative solutions on the way ahead. At bilateral level also, India tries to forge understanding with regional actors for peace and stability in the region. Indian Prime Minister Modi visited three Indian Ocean nations-Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in March 2015. The visit has a larger aim to secure

India's strategic and economic interests in Indian Ocean. In Seychelles, India announced sale of another Dronier Aircraft and setting up of a project of coastal monitoring radar system. In Mauritius, Modi launched a 1300 ton capacity naval warship which was supplied by India and announced that 13 more warships will be supplied in future.

*3. Bilateral and Multilateral Maritime Cooperation with Other Powers:* India has also followed the policy of forging maritime collaboration with other major powers like US, Japan, Australia and some other smaller countries having stake in the Indian Ocean. In this respect Indo-US partnership is more important because of latter's influence and stakes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Besides regular Malabar joint Indo-US naval exercises, both navies have forged closer link for inter-operational cooperation. Indian navy has provided naval protection for US shipping in Malacca Strait in 2002, both forged close cooperation in responding to 2004 tsunami disaster, US warships have visited India and both have started a dialogue on missile defence and air born warning and control system (Singh: 2013). In spite of Chinese opposition, India has invited Japan to join Malabar exercises in 2016 and Australia may join in future. During Obama visit to India in 2015, both countries signed the *US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*, which affirms the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea (NEA: 2015). The US designated India as a major defence partner in 2016. The US declared India as a major strategic partner and China as an enemy in the National Security Strategy announced in December, 2017. American President has revived the idea of QUAD, which is a four-nation (US, India, Japan, and Australia) strategic partnership in the Indo-pacific region. India and the US have already signed the three foundational agreements to facilitate the interoperability of defence forces of the two countries.

Similarly India has also conducted exercises with the navies of Australia, Singapore, Myanmar, Japan and Indonesia. India has developed strategic understanding on core issues like the open and free Indian Ocean and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. In 2015, India and the UK agreed on a new *Defence and International Security Partnership* aimed to intensify cooperation on defence and security, including cyber security, counter-terrorism and maritime security. During Modi's visit to UK, both agreed to cooperate to tackle threats like piracy,

protect freedom of navigation and open access, and improve maritime domain awareness in the region. India and France signed a *Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region* in April 2018; which aims to address the emerging challenges in the Indian Ocean Region that include: maritime traffic security in the face of the threats of terrorism and piracy; respect of international law by all States, in particular freedom of navigation and over flight; fight against organized crime, trafficking; combating climate change and its consequences on security. In October, 2018, India and Japan also concluded a vision statement, which calls for a rule-based framework for the Indo-Pacific that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations and ensures freedom of navigation. India's collaboration, cooperation and understanding with other nations on Indo-Pacific are gradually unfolding and are largely China-centric.

### **Chinese Maritime Interests and Strategy**

#### *China's Stakes in the Indian Ocean*

China has opened her economy in 1978 and achieved nearly 10 percent economic growth for three decades. Globalization has propelled her economy in big way. She has lifted 300 million people out of poverty. Consequently, China has emerged as the second largest economy of the world after the US. Japan has been pushed to the third position. With the growing economy, the Chinese interests have also assumed global dimensions. With this economic growth, China's global influence is also on rise. In spite of a huge domestic market, Chinese economic push was largely propelled by her burgeoning external trade and investment and continuous supply of energy resources from external sources like Middle East and Africa. If China wants to maintain its position as a rising global power, it has to maintain the momentum of her economic growth and for that it has to ensure the continuous and uninterrupted supply for material and energy resources from external sources. Though, China has been primarily preoccupied with Pacific Ocean, her trade and energy routes which lie in the West and the South bring her closer to the Indian Ocean. Thus, it logically prompts China's involvement in the IOR as well as Pacific Ocean. China has following strategic interests in the IOR:

1. To ensure the safety of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) to maintain the

uninterrupted supply of her trade and energy resources. According to Kaplan (2014), 'As for now, Beijing's principal interest seems to lie in the need to protecting the SLOC along the Indian Ocean, vital for the country's energy import'. In fact, China surpassed the US in 2013 to become the world's largest oil importer (Samaranayake: 2014).

2. To ensure the security of choke points of Indian Ocean mainly Malacca Strait and Lombok Strait in the East and Bab el Mandeb and Hormuz strait in the west.

3. Conversely to deny other powers mainly India and the US to gain undue influence in the Indo-Pacific region, detrimental to China's strategic interests in the region.

*Chinese Maritime Strategy:* Though China is yet to lay down a comprehensive Indian Ocean strategy, the Chinese think tank (Blue Book: 2013) have made a case for a more proactive role for China in the IOR. It says, 'If (China) cannot have positive impact on these regional powers and Indian Ocean littoral states, the future situation would be even more severe and will affect China's development and peace negatively.' It also warns that New Delhi is preparing for a 'two-front war' with China and Pakistan and notes the developing strength of India's blue water navy (Tharoor: 2013). However, in view of emerging needs of rising China, her global interests have also expanded, which is visible in her maritime behaviour and unfolding strategy in the IOR. Kaplan (2014) remarks that, as a corollary, the PRC's naval objectives have undergone a shift from that of conducting coastal defence activities to offshore defence and ultimately to far sea defence. The latest Chinese Defence White Paper, released in 2013, calls for protecting national maritime rights and interests and armed forces providing reliable support to China's interests overseas. During the 19th Party Congress held in October 2017, the idea of Chinese Dream was further articulated and it was resolved to develop a defence force which wins battles. The expansion of the role of navy, power projection and its modernization are the basic ingredients of China's maritime strategy. Accordingly the unfolding Chinese maritime strategy has three dimensions:

1. *Strategic and Cooperative Partnership with Littoral States of IOR:* China understands that India and the US both are better placed in the IOR, because of different reasons. In order to bolster her presence in the IOR, China has initiated a policy of seeking naval facilities and strategic partnership with the littoral states surrounding India. Since China has maritime disputes with all his neighbours in Pacific

Ocean, the strategic maritime collaboration is being cultivated in with the littoral states of Indian Ocean. Under this strategy, China has availed naval facilities at Gwader in Pakistan, electronic gathering facilities on islands in Bay of Bengal, port facilities in Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Chittagong in Bangladesh, naval bases in Myanmar, funding of the construction of canal across the Kra Isthmus, signing the military agreement with Cambodia and so on. Pakistan is a strategic ally and all weather friend of China, who is building road and rail link from Gwader to mainland China through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), an area which is also claimed by India. In spite of many Chinese claims the commercial motive of these facilities is not explicit. Anand Kumar (2012) remarks, 'But most of these ports are not economically viable, unless they serve non-economic purposes. The deep sea ports at Gwader and Hambantota will allow the Chinese to monitor Indian and US naval activity in the region. If we take into account this aspect of Chinese ventures, this also means containment of India and challenge to US military power.'

This strategy is also known as 'string of pearls' a term which originated in a 2004 study of Booz Allen Consultants, submitted to Pentagon and subsequently popularized by Washington Post reporter Bill Gertz. In America, it is seen as China's attempt to gain strategic foothold in Indian Ocean and for many Indian scholars, it is now an article of faith that China is encircling India from sea (Holms: 2010).

The 'string of pearls' strategy of China has generated much heat in strategic circles in India. In order to overcome the its military aspect, China has come out with its benign version in 2013, which is known as 'Maritime Silk Route' (MSR) proposal, which focuses on developing port and other facilities across littoral states of Indian ocean but ostensibly for trade purposes. According to Abhijit Singh (2014), 'the MSR project is surrogate for giant Chinese SLOC running from all the way from the East African coast to the Southern coast of China-created, maintained and controlled by Beijing. In its ultimate form, therefore, the MSR would end upsetting up Chinese logistical hubs in Indian Ocean, linking up already 'existing string of pearls'. From developing maritime infrastructure in Gwadar, Hambantota and Chittagong in South Asia to building and revitalizing port facilities in Mombasa, Dar-e-Salam and Bagamoyo on the East Coast of Africa, Beijing appears intent on deepening her footprints in the Indian Ocean. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through Pak-

Occupied Kashmir is also a part of the MSR.

2. *Modernization of Naval Forces:* In order to match the strength of her naval forces to her growing economic and strategic needs, China has moved on rapid modernization of her navy in last two decades. Bedford (2000) argues that there are two main reasons for the rapid modernization of People Liberation Army navy (PLAN): necessity and opportunity. Necessity emerged rising overseas economic interests. The opportunity came with the disintegration of Soviet Union as China was freed from land dispute worries and concentrated on her maritime disputes over the status of Taiwan, the Spratly and Parcel Islands, and the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. During 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the US deployed two aircraft carriers against China, which exposed weakness of Chinese naval forces and prompted China for naval modernization. Since the 1990s, the PLAN has strengthened its forces around four core elements: frigates and destroyers; submarines; naval fighters; and anti-ship missiles. It is unsurprising that these are precisely the systems required to fight a sea battle against an aircraft carrier and its battle group. China has inducted her first aircraft carrier in Liaoning in 2016; second aircraft carrier *Shandong* in 2017 and the third carrier are under preparation. China's growing naval capability has resulted in an impression that Beijing not only seeks primacy in near seas but naval dominance in far flung areas. The naval expansion of the PLA continues apace through its Anti-access and Area Denial (AAAD) capabilities. The Chinese navy has made progress in both the surface and subsurface segment of its fleet (Pant: 2018). At present, the Chinese Navy is the second largest navy in the world after the US Navy.

China's defence budget has seen a 8-10 percent annual increase. China has announced an 8.1 percent increase in its defence budget for 2018, amounting to \$175 billion, which is over three times more than India's \$45-billion defence allocation. With high defence budget, China is focused on modernizing its forces, including building a powerful naval fleet and air bases. In comparison, India's modernization programmes, such as procurement of new combat jets for bringing up the numbers of fighter squadrons, next generation submarines and future infantry combat vehicles, have slowed down. India needs to quickly bridge the gap in military capabilities with China (The Economic Times: 2018)

3. *Strategic Deployment of Naval Forces and power Projection in IOR:* This is the new emerging

elements of Chinese maritime strategy. The increasing incidents of piracy across Gulf of Aden provided an opportunity to China in 2008, when it deployed her naval forces in this region to fight piracy. China deployed two destroyers and the supply ship in the region. A team of sixteen Special Forces Members, armed with attack helicopters were also deployed. Later, China has maintained a three-ship flotilla of two warships and one supply ship in the Gulf of Aden. India and China came face to face in Ocean for the first time in 2011, when India signed a contract with Vietnam for oil exploration in the South China Sea, but it was opposed by China. With the increasing deployment of Chinese forces in the region, India decided not to go for exploration, citing economic non-viability of oil fields. China has already bolstered her naval presence in East China Sea by declaring Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). In 2014, in the wake of missing Malaysian Airliner, India politely refused a Chinese request to launch search operation off the coast of Indian Islands territory Andaman and Nicobar (The Hindu: 2014). In 2014, a Chinese nuclear powered attack submarine (SSN) made its first declared operational patrol for two months (Dec. 2013 to Feb. 2014) in Indian Ocean. The Chinese submarine, armed with land attack and anti-ship cruise missiles and torpedoes reached Gulf of Aden via Ombai Water Straits near Indonesia (Unnithan: 2014). China's growing influence and presence in the Indian Ocean is a fact, which both India and the US should note.

Chinese power projection is more blatant in the South China Sea (SCS). It involves the competing claims of territorial sovereignty over the South China Sea by China and her five neighbours-Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan. China does not recognize the 1982 Law of Sea Convention and claims 90 percent of the SCS on historical basis. China has developed military facilities in SCS islands, whereas the US conducts the freedom of navigation drill in the same region on regular basis. On this issue, the US, Japan, Australia and India are aligned against China.

### **The United States: Interests and Strategy in Indo-Pacific**

#### *US interest in the Indo-Pacific*

The United States is one of the three preeminent actors having significant naval presence and interests in the IOR. The presence of US in the Indian has been a part of her global naval presence



and predominance. She has been and continues to be a 'Resident Power' in the Pacific Ocean with naval bases and bilateral security arrangement with regional actors mainly Japan, South Korea and Australia. The US has considerable naval presence in Diego Garcia in the form of Naval Support Facility, established in 1977, including a large naval ship and submarine support base, military air base, communication and space-tracking facility and an anchorage for pre-positioned military supplies for regional operations. Diego Garcia is part of the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT), which was given to the US in 1966 for fifty years lease, with provision of further optional extension for 20 years. The US commissioned Naval Air Facility in 1981. With the completion of a new port facility in 1985, the first US aircraft carrier was also commissioned in Diego Garcia. The Strategic Air Command also deployed B-52 Bombers in 1987. The strategic potential of US naval base in Diego Garcia is further bolstered due to its close coordination with 5th Fleet positioned in Bahrain in the west and 6th Fleet positioned in the in Japan in the east. The US effectively utilized Ariel bombing facilities of Diego Garcia during Gulf War 1991, invasion in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraqi invasion 2003. The US is a Status-Quoist power, as it still wants to maintain her naval dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. Accordingly, she has following strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region (Future Directions: 2011):

1. Ensuring that US objectives are not jeopardized by states such as China and Iran.
2. Preventing new or established extremist groups from harming the interests of the US or allied Indian Ocean littoral states.
3. Ensuring that the US policy is supported by a network of diplomatic relations with view to secure trade relations, military cooperation and influence.
4. Ensuring continued access to markets, energy supplies and raw materials.
5. Ensuring the security of maritime choke points and Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs).

#### *The US strategy in the Indo-Pacific*

The US strategy in the Indo-pacific is to maintain her traditional maritime influence as a resident power in the Indo-pacific region in the face of rising China. Kaplan (2014) notes that US interest in the IOR centres around three imperatives: securing Indian Ocean for international commerce; avoiding regional conflict on issues of strategic

choke points-strait of Hormuz and Malacca Strait; and dealing with Sino-Indian competition in IOR. As per the US Defence Department's document, 'Strategic Choices and management Review' (July 2013), US strategy on Indian Ocean revolves around building a coalition with regional allies like Japan, Australia, and the Philippines and the partners like India and Vietnam. The US has also promoted the concept of Indo-Pacific to adopt an integrated approach to the entire region. Its 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' strategy (2011) also seeks to cement strategic partnerships with other countries in this region to balance the rising military and economic power of China. Perhaps, Washington is going to adopt the strategy of offshore balancing, advocated by renowned international relations scholars like John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. The strategy relies on the coordination and support of the American alliance network in Asia to contain or check the development of China. The United States will maintain very close relations with India, Japan, Australia, Philippines, South Korea and Vietnam to use their combined military, political and economic power against China (Paul: 2018).

India and Australia have positively reacted to Indo-Pacific concept, but China is suspicious of the concept as it may be used by the US to contain China. In spite of this concept, the fact cannot be denied that the US has been and continues to be a 'Resident Power' in the Pacific region, with close security ties with her regional allies. Thus, the US will have to continue to bear the primary responsibility to maintain peace and stability in the region till some new regional security architecture is not evolved. In 2017, The US has named her Pacific Command as 'Indo- Pacific Command. The US is gradually forging strategic partnership with regional actors like India, Japan, Australia and Vietnam, but at the same time keeps on challenging the Chinese power projection by conducting freedom of navigation drills on regular basis, which have caused tensions in the region.

**Table 1:** Comparative Strength of Naval Forces of US, China and India [1]

Naval Force Component	United States	China	India
Total personnel strength	323000 (excluding 109000 reserves)	255000	58350
Aircraft carriers	13	02	02
Submarines	53	63	15
Frigates	24	47	15
Destroyers	62	25	08

### Indian and China: Strategic Moves and Rivalry and US

Both India and China are the emerging powers of Asia. The much discussed notion of 'Rise of Asia' revolves around the position and influence of these two largest nations in the global economic and political affairs. This global profile of the two has contradictory overtones: sometimes it seems aligned against the predominance of the US and her European allies, but at the same time directed against each other. Many scholars like Kaplan (2011), Mohan Malik (2012), C. Raja Mohan (2013) and others have predicted the intensification of ongoing maritime rivalry between India and China in IOR/ Pacific Ocean due to their overlapping interests and conflicting ambitions. Malik argues, 'And both remain suspicious of each other's long-term agenda and intentions. Each perceives the other as pursuing hegemony and entertaining imperial ambitions. Both are non-status quo powers: China in terms of *territory*, power, and influence; India in terms of *status*, power, and influence. Both seek to expand their power and influence in and beyond their regions at each other's expense. If China's navy is going south to the Indian Ocean, India's navy is going east to the Pacific Ocean'. The strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is changing fast. In the last few years, there is growing strategic rivalry between major powers such as China and India as they expand their roles in the region (Brewster: 2018). C. Raja Mohan, using the ancient Indian mythological narrative of '*Samudramanathan*' (Churning of Ocean by demons and gods and subsequent fight between them over the distribution of booty, in which gods were helped by the Super God Vishnu), he argues that there is inherent clash of interest between India (gods) and China (demons) and the US (Vishnu) will help India.

The weakness of this narrative lies in the fact that it precludes the possibility of maritime collaboration between US and China on the one hand and India and China on the other (The Hindu: 2014). Again, he buys the prevailing American notion of 'Indo-Pacific', which ignores the fact that the Indian interests in the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean are not the same as Chinese interests and vice versa.

The notion of 'rivalry' needs deeper analysis. Both India and Japan are equally dependent on Indian Ocean for energy supply and trade but why there is no talk of rivalry between the two? There are deeper reasons for this rivalry between India and China.

*First*, like the nuclear technology, the notion of maritime security and associated moves, also have 'double use'-both for promotion of valid economic interests as well increasing the power and influence. That is how many nations are not convinced with China's 'Peaceful Rise' thesis or innocuous looking maritime silk route proposal.

*Second*, the historical background of mistrust, war (1962) and boundary disputes between them gives credence to rivalry hypothesis. Added factors are China's authoritarian political system, prevailing secrecy in defence and foreign policies and its aggressive pursuits of national interest in engaging with external countries, regardless of the nature of their political regime (North Korea and Myanmar).

*Third*, the predominance presence external power like the US in the Indo-Pacific and its evolving continuous maritime partnership with India raises security concerns in China also. Whatever we may term we may give, there is a sense of distrust between India and China in pursuing their respective maritime interests.

#### India's Options

What are the options available for the US, which is still a pre-eminent naval power in Indo-Pacific region? Kaplan predicts the increasing rivalry between India and China amidst 'elegant decline' of American naval power, which will forge greater collaborative mechanisms with other powers in the region. The Obama administration's 'Pivot' or 'Rebalancing' (2011) is designed to that end. America is going to stay for long in the Indo-Pacific. American-Indian strategic maritime collaboration may not be entertained by India to the extent that it is anti-China. India would like to maintain her *strategic autonomy* till her core interests are not threatened by China. Moreover, India is still a hesitant emerging maritime power, with focus on her core interests in the IOR. A closer India-US strategic embrace against China make intensify Indo-China tensions.

However, some scholars (Mukharjee: 2018) argue that India has failed to develop economic and strategic interdependence with her neighbouring littoral states in Indian Ocean, which gave space for China to expand her influence in the region. In order to gain strategic buffer space in the Indian Ocean, India should shed her strategic autonomy and develop strategic partnership and interoperability alliance with US, France and Australia. Mohan (2018) also supports India's close alliance with Japan and the US to face Chinese challenges due to India's weak position,

American retrenchment, rise of China, and Russia also shaking hands with China.

In spite of much talk of rivalry between India and China in IOR, the potential flash points of maritime conflicts are still located in the Pacific Ocean- South China Sea; East China Sea; and Taiwan Strait. China would first like to assert its naval supremacy in these spots, where it is likely to come in direct conflict with her smaller neighbours. It is at this point that the US strategy will be on test. Given the naval superiority of US and its effective presence in the region, China may not like to move ahead beyond a certain point in near future. India is not likely to get directly involved against China in any such conflict in the Pacific Ocean. India-China naval show off in 2011 in South China Sea on oil exploration issue is a case in point. However, if it comes to Indian Ocean, India may not back off as it is directly linked with her security and other vital interests. Moreover, China's adventure in the Indian Ocean will prove advantageous to India because of latter's geographical position. The fact of China's economic and military resurgent cannot be denied. But it cannot also be denied that the strategic configurations in Indo-Pacific are highly unfavorable to China as majority of regional and international actors are apprehensive of her intentions. Therefore, the US is encouraging the evolution of a collaborative security mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region; consisting of Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, Philippines and others to ensure peace and stability in the region. How far India is likely to go with the US in this strategy, appears uncertain due to a number of factors.

The US wants India to play larger role in South-East Asia and to encourage strategic partnership with India to counter Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Yet this partnership may not be smooth because of some perceptual and strategic differences between the two nations. Ashley J Tellis (2012) observes that the US considers Indian Ocean as a 'Global Common' or as Alfred Mahan terms as 'great highway'---a wide common, whereas India considers it as a 'coherent sub-region or 'Indian Ocean Society' with distinct cultural and historical linkages and commonness among the littoral states. Some scholars like C Udai Bhaskar and Geoffrey Kemp (2011) find that due to different perception between India and the US on the position of Pakistan and Iran, strategic partnership faces hurdles. However, these writers comment that both countries have certain common interests like control of piracy and defining the rules of road for the use of global commons, which provide opportunity

for maritime partnership and cooperation. The fundamental problem is that the US has larger global issues which affect the prospects of Indo-US maritime partnership, whereas Indian stakes are largely regional in nature. Whatever may be the China's moves, and U.S. and Indian responses, have led some analysts to worry about a "new Cold War" brewing in the Indian Ocean. Although the Trump administration has recently announced its new "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy" it is not interested in countering the Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (Brewster: 2018). It seems the US is mainly interested in the Pacific region.

Also there are certain other factors of compulsive nature which restrict the scope of rivalry between India and China. The rivalry between India and China may not take hot form as both have learned to live under suspicion for long time and both have stake in the existing global order as their rise is the product of this order. Stuenkel (2013) argues that given the internal problems and the bilateral economic engagement between the two, they will not go for another war. Rasgotra (2014) also concludes that their shared objectives should underpin greater cooperation rather than competition between India and China. In this interdependent world, the most likely scenario is that China's valid strategic interests will be accommodated in the Indo-Pacific region with some friction. The predominance maritime position of the US will have stabilizing effect and it is likely to play a balancing maritime game in the region. The US navy is still far superior to China's navy.

#### Notes

1. The figures of naval strength of the US, China and India are derived from two sources: (a) Greenfield, Daniel (2012) is the US Navy Big Enough to Take on China and Iran? Available At: <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2012/dgreenfield/is-the-us-navy-big-enough-to-take-on-china-and-iran/>, and (b) Indian Navy (2014). Available At: <http://indiannavy.nic.in/naval-fleet/ship>

2. India has built a road from Afghanistan to the Gulf of Oman. The Zaranj - Delaram road, built by India, is part of a larger Trilateral Project (India, Iran and Afghanistan) that will connect Kandahar and Herat to Iran's Chabahar Port on the Persian Gulf, which is being developed by Indian assistance. A railway line is also planned along with Zaranj-Delaram road in Afghanistan and up to Chabahar port in Iran. This project will provide India with new sea access point to Central Asia through Persian Gulf. It should be noted that

Chabahar port is just 76 nautical miles away from the Chinese built Gwader port of Pakistan.

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