

INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGIC COMPETITION: CHALLENGES AND CHOICES FOR PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean (IO) emerged as a theater of strategic competition between existing and emerging powers. The strategic convergence and divergence of the United States, India, and China have shaped the lines of contest in the region. Primarily, the contesting states, aim to secure strategic interests and extend their area of influence across the maritime domain. The U.S-China and India-China competitions are the main highlights of contemporary strategic construct of the Indian Ocean. Owing to geostrategic location and varying nature of relations with three competing powers, Pakistan cannot remain unaffected by this friction. Moreover, Pakistan's economic and security interests are deeply linked with the Indian Ocean waters. Thus, the maneuvering and strategic moves of regional and extra-regional powers present a complex strategic environment for Pakistan. This study examines the strategic interests and policies of competing powers along the Indo-Pacific waters in general and in the Indian Ocean in particular. The investigation of data reveals that the challenges to Pakistan mainly emanate from the India's aspirations to attain a dominant role in the Indian Ocean. This Indian thinking is driven by India's long-held belief that the Indian Ocean is India's ocean. India and the U.S share common threat perception regarding China's rise, thus shaping the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership across maritime domain. This growing partnership presents risks to Pakistan's interests in maritime domain and threatens successful execution of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Given the challenges, strengthening China-Pakistan maritime cooperation, increasing participation in multilateral maritime security frameworks, and making CPEC inclusive will be crucial for Pakistan in dealing with challenging regional strategic construct.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, Chokepoints, Littorals, Maritime Strategy, Indo-Pacific, QUAD, BRI, CPEC, SLOCs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean (IO), the most important water body, turned out to be the crucial strategic arena of the 21st century. The third largest water body, IO shares nearly 27 percent of blue space of the earth's map while 14 percent of planet earth covering 68,536,000 Sq Km (PN, 2018). The IO's historical significance is associated to its vitally natural resources, geography, and critical sea routes. The geographic settings of the region are characterized by the "Antarctica on the South, Southern part of the Asia on the North, Arabian Peninsula and Africa in the West while Australia, the Sunda Islands, and Malay Peninsula to the East of this ocean" (Fatima & Jamshed 2015).

The geography bounded by the land on three sides makes IO unique amongst all five oceans. The ocean is surrounded by around 51 littoral and hinterland states, which are unique for their political, economic, religious, and social diversity (Cordner 2018). The Ocean is home to various critically important and economically viable waterways that provide connection between regional countries and the rest of the world. Global shipping mainly rely on these specific chokepoints for entering and exiting the Indian Ocean region.

The Ocean is home to global maritime activity because of important chokepoints that pass through this region. The regional waterways provide predominant routes for Persian Gulf oil to reach the diverse destinations across the world. Among many trade routes the Strait of Malacca (Indonesia-Malaysia), Strait of Hormuz (Iran-Oman), Suez Canal (Egypt), and Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen) are the critically important waterways of the region (PN 2018). These waterways cater around 80% global oil trade destined for different parts of the world (Ahmad 2017).

The strategically important chokepoints and wealth of natural resources have made the Ocean attractive place for many global powers. Moreover, the divergent and convergent interests of states regional and extra-regional states especially that of the U.S., China, and India have shaped strategic competition across maritime domain. Pakistan, due its geography, strategic interests, and relations with the three nations, has become part of the trilateral regional competition.

With over 1,000 km coast, Pakistan is one of the important littorals of the Indian Ocean having economic and security interests fundamentally connected to regional waters. Pakistan heavily depends on this ocean for its trading activity and around 95 % of Pakistan's trade is carried out through the region's sea lines (Alam 2019). The energy imports that run the economy of Pakistan mainly rely on the IO sea routes. Pakistan's security interests are also associated with this region and mainly determined by historical rivalry with

India, Indian aspirations of becoming regional hegemon and activities of illicit networks across maritime domain.

Given the Pakistan's economic and security interests, the evolving strategic environment characterized by competition and cooperation has unveiled renewed challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. The current study attempts to examine the interests and strategies of the three competing nations. The paper evaluates the characteristics of challenges Pakistan is exposed to. Moreover, the current study also evaluates choices available to Pakistan to secure strategic interests across the region.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Indian Ocean has become the most critical subject of inquiry across academics and researchers community. The reason being the political, commercial, and strategic significance of this water body. Scholars have studied the complex relation of regional and extra-regional powers that constitute regional strategic competition.

Kaplan (2009) studied the possible commercial and military rivalries in the Indian Ocean. He investigated the geographic, ethnic, geo-economic, and geo-political dimension vis-à-vis prospective competition in the region. His investigations suggest that the Indian Ocean is the Centre for global struggles. The region bears the shared economic and political interests, thus will see great power rivalry between Chinese and Indians. In this article author also highlighted the role of U.S for maintaining its presence in the region.

Kaplan (2010), maintained "*that Indian Ocean has become the new stage for global geo-politic*". He highlighted the importance IO chokepoints from where the large amount of global oil trade traverses on daily basis, which turn the region into lifeline for global trade. Author argued that U.S. presence and policies vis-à-vis IO appear to be critical amidst ongoing competition between China and India.

Bouchard & Crumplin (2010), highlighted that "the Indian Ocean was largely a neglected region in policy considerations of the great powers, however, with the turn of new century the region attracted significant attention of existing and emerging power". Most significant feature of the Ocean, as highlighted by the authors, is its diversity culture, politics, population, and economy. According to the authors "the region has gained momentum due to extensive natural resources, critical SLOCs, religious extremism, Indian economic boost, and presence of external powers particularly China and U.S".

Green & Shearer (2012) maintained "security of sea routes, maintenance of free navigation, and protecting the Indian Ocean from regional rivalries are the fundamental interests of the U.S. interests and should remain

the focus of U.S. strategy in the Indian Ocean". Article concluded that for protecting these interests and addressing concerns U.S. does not need any new regional undertaking but should follow traditional alliance building, maintaining naval presence, and nurturing strategic partnership with emerging India.

Lou (2012) suggests, "China, India, and the U.S have been most important players in the region because of their interests imbedded here". Author argues that three countries face similar security risks in the region thus; it is needed for them to reasonably compete and undertake measures for functional cooperation.

Scott (2013) studied the aspirations, policies, and strategies of India for devising its role in the Indian Ocean. It highlighted that ongoing debates among political and military figures manifest that India has high aspirations for its role in the Indian Ocean. For realizing, the aspirations Indian maritime strategy is carefully devised which encompasses the naval buildups, infrastructure developments, and maritime diplomacy. With this strategy and alignment with U.S., India opts for consolidating its presence and encircling China.

Brewster (2014) studies strategic the Sino-Indian competition through prism of security dilemma. He maintained, given the geographic position, India has overwhelming advantage over China and China may not be able to undo that in near future. It also maintained that there are reasonable realities, which can control the competition between the two rivals as both are attempting to extend their influence across the region.

Tariq (2014) has extensively studied the geopolitical complexity of the region. Author concluded that both "India and Pakistan" are largely expanding their naval platforms for power projection and securing their interests across maritime domain. It also enunciated that both countries have their economic and security interests within their respective maritime boundaries and beyond thus they will not back off from this region.

Vaughn, (2018), studied the spectrum of Indo-China friction in the Indian Ocean. He maintained that the conflict between the two is driven by their economic growth, which is linked with the seaborne trade (import & exports) that transit through the critical SLOCs of the region. He concluded that this rivalry bears strategic implications for U.S.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on qualitative research methods for examining the discourses on the historical and contemporary developments in the Indian Ocean. Historical, interpretative, and analytical approaches employed in this

study to examine the secondary data and analyze the developing scenarios in the Indian Ocean. Secondary data sources are used such as books, research paper, published research reports, newspapers, and the official documents, which are available in public domain.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Competition between Existing and Emerging Powers

The Indian Ocean, due to its strategic, security, and commercial significance has evolved as the competition theater in 21st century. The evolving and existing powers have various economic and security interests which are divergent or convergent in nature. The level of dependence of the regional and foreign players on the IO's natural resources and the critical sea lines of communications (SLOCs) have transformed the region into a new battle ground (Khalid 2013).

The regional security construct is determined by the animosity, fragile cooperation, and the uncontrolled arms race between the regional states. The vulnerable regional security has attracted the regional and foreign powers to maintain weighty presence for securing their strategic interests. Foreign powers, particularly U.S. and China, configuring their relations with IO littorals in a way that guarantee fulfillment of their strategic objectives. These powers consider the security of SLOCs and free-navigation as chief concern due to their economic interests in this region. (Ho & Raymond 2005). Moreover, India also places IO in its strategic considerations. India's interests are connected to this region thus desire for attaining an authoritative role. Given the growing significance of the region and evolving strategic policies of existing and emerging powers, the ocean has emerged as a competitive sphere in this contemporary era.

4.2 U.S. Strategic Interests In the Indian Ocean

During and after the cold, the U.S. has been an active player in the oceans bordering Asia (Indian Ocean & Pacific Ocean). The U.S. interests in the region can be categorized into the economic, political, and security spheres. Prime concern of the U.S. across the region is security of SLOCs and emergence of competitors. The enduring commitment to the region defines the nature and importance of strategic interests that seek to secure open Indian Ocean thoroughfare, navigational freedom through chokepoints, and preventing the regional competitions (Green & Shearer 2012). In order to secure its interests, the U.S. has been undertaking different levels of engagement with the region.

The U.S. economic interests linked with region include free flow of oil and raw materials. Arguably, vitally important resources and safe passage of the same through IO chokepoints to the industrialized world is important for the U.S. (Ahmar 1986). Although U.S. dependence on the Gulf oil has seen extensive decline owing to the indigenous production by Shale oil, it maintains vital economic relations with IO nations. Given this critical economic relationship, the regional trade routes hold great importance and the obstruction of any kind would be a threat to economic interests of western world and particularly the U.S. (Sakhuja 2005). Therefore, the safety of maritime trade passing through IO chokepoints is strategically important for U.S.

The threat of emerging regional and extra-regional powers has determined the U.S. security interests and nature of alignment along the region. The U.S. chief security worries across the region are involvement of China, the threat of Iran, and activities of non-state actors. The U.S. forward military presence and engagements with regional allies (India and Gulf states) aim to deter Iran and contain Chinese influence. Similarly, to deal with terrorist activities of non-states actors the U.S. also undertakes and participates in regional counterterrorism initiatives in countries like Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen (Ladwig, 2014).

The U.S. military strategies across the region involve routine naval operations and the forward deployment to ensure the considerable presence in the IO. The U.S. with its vital naval and air base at Diego Garcia maintains its operations in IO. Establishment of naval facility of Diego Garcia is vitally important for U.S. influence and undertakings in distant waters of Southwest and Southeast Asia (Green & Shearer 2012). Moreover, the U.S. is maintaining various tactical forces and collaborative maritime security frameworks such as "Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) under U.S Naval Forces Central Command". CMF undertakes its mandated operations through various combined task force (CTF) groups including CTF-150, CTF-151, and CTF-152. CTFs under U.S CENTCOM operate for counterterrorism, security of SLOCs, counter-piracy, and complimenting regional capabilities (Khan & Aijaz 2012).

Over the last one decade the U.S. policy towards the Asian continent and its waters has undergone significant transformation, which redefined the interests and level of engagement. The U.S administration under President Obama and President Trump presented the renewed priorities and preference of engagement with this region. In 2011 U.S administration under Obama unveiled a new "Pivot" or "Rebalance" policy that encouraged strengthening of its role in Asia pacific which became *"the center of gravity for U.S. foreign policy, national security, and economic interests shifting towards Asia,"* (Manyin,

et al. 2012). Recalibration of U.S. strategy was motivated by the shift of global politics from the west to the east. Trump administration rolled back this policy as it considered as an unnecessary commitment. However, in 2017 Trump unveiled its new set of priorities called “Indo-Pacific Strategy” offering expanded and revised version of previous policy of Pivot.

4.3 China’s Strategic Interests in the Indian Ocean

China’s role across the globe is shaped by its unprecedented economic rise over last two decades. The Chinese government and strategic thinkers recognize the centrality of chokepoints of two oceans “Pacific and the Indian Oceans” for meeting needs of growing economy. The commercial activities of China heavily depend on the African and Gulf oil, which pass through critical waterways of the Indian Ocean (Lou 2012). Therefore, core of strategic interest of China is the development of a framework that secures the sea routes and freedom of navigation across the Ocean from where the ships pass that carry goods and energy resources critical for China’s economy (Kaplan 2014).

The SLOCs from the oil rich Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca are vital waterways for China (Brewster 2015). It is estimated, that over 70% of China’s oil imports pass through Malacca (Paszak 2021). While 40 % of hydrocarbon imports reach China by passing through Strait of Hormuz (Brewster 2015). Besides energy supplies, the main source of China’s manufacturing industry are raw materials imports from Africa and Asia which also pass through the chokepoints of IO.

Given the heavy reliance on the energy imports through Malacca and strategic vulnerabilities posed by geography, China is concerned about its energy security. Moreover, the shifting of centrality of global powers competitions to the Indian Ocean has also added to Chinese worries. China’s former President Hu Jiantao also identified these concerns across this critical waterway as China’s “Malacca Dilemma” (Storey, 2006). In addition to the geographic limitations, China’s “Malacca Dilemma” has also become more critical due to factors like U.S presence and India’s “Look East” policy complemented by naval modernization. Energy security and emerging challenges into maritime domain have determined China’s policy of establishing diplomatic, economic, and security relationships with various IO nations. China has embarked on cultivating relationships with the IO littorals (Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, & Sri Lanka) for securing energy imports from Middle East and maintaining a robust regional naval presence.

4.4 India's Strategic Interests In the Indian Ocean

India, with coastline of over 7500 KM, is one of the important Indian Ocean nations. India, because of its geography, is deeply reliant on the sea for economic and security interests. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi while addressing a gathering in Mauritius highlighted that the IO stands at the top of India's policy preferences (Jaishankar 2016). *"Indian economy is heavily dependent on the IO's SLOCs that carry the 95 % by volume and 68% by value India's trade"* (Government of India 2020). About 80 % of oil that support Indian economy passes through this ocean (Jaishankar 2016). Owing to heavy reliance, India's prime interests in the region is security of waterways and the free flow of trade through IO chokepoints.

On the security dimension, India's concerns are shaped by growing sway of extra-regional powers in the region. India views Pakistan and China cooperation along the maritime domain as a threat to Indian interests. Pakistan-China strategic alignment amidst territorial conflicts with both derive outline of India's anti-China strategy in the region. India considers China's presence in IO as encirclement attempt through strategic military buildups (Khurana 2008). Thus, containment of China's alignment with Pakistan and growing influence across the region are critical imperatives of India in the IO.

Along with the commercial and security compulsions, India's policies are determined by its long awaited dream of becoming leading player in IO. Indian Ocean being "India's Ocean" is commonly held belief or notion among Indian strategists (Scott 2006). This belief evolved from strategic thinking of Indian maritime strategist K.M Panikar who believed that Indian Ocean is vital for India because, unlike other nations, its lifelines are imbedded in the region therefore the freedom of navigation through this region ensures the India's freedom (Pannikar, 1945). Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru recognized that India's independence and trade is linked to this ocean thus the control of this ocean by other powers will undermine India's commercial interests and sovereignty (Berlin 2006). This has remained the constant focus of India's leadership in devising policies and strategies vis-à-vis IO waters.

The evolution of India's maritime strategy reflects continuous transition from the continental look to seaward attention. Economic and military growth have changed Indian strategic consideration as Admiral Wolfgang Wegner highlighted "Strategic Will to the Sea" (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2010). In 21st century drivers of India's maritime strategy are aspirations of becoming dominant power, countering Pakistan, containing china, protecting trade, and combating traditional and non-traditional threats. Renowned strategists including K M Pannikar and Keshav Vaidya laid the foundations for

India's maritime thinking and emphasized on development of sophisticated naval power for strategic needs of country (Bateman & Ho 2012). However, the thoughts of Alfred Thayer Mahan, related to the IO had a significant impact on Indian maritime thinking which became evident in the modern day ambitions and naval engagements across IO.

The maritime doctrine of 2004 and the revised versions of 2009, and 2015 established renewed vision, which visualized country's role in maritime domain with "blue water" navy (Ullah 2019). The Maritime Military Strategies of 2007 and 2015 also contributed to the evolution Indian Maritime Strategy. The 2004 doctrine was a comprehensive document that outlined India's geostrategic imperatives and interests constituting India's "maritime destiny" (Ashraf 2004). The doctrine reflected the Mahanian vision as it insisted upon the extending the nuclear deterrence in maritime domain and need to control the critical trade routes and islands of the Indian Ocean (Scott 2006). The doctrine also projected India's aspirations of hegemonic role as it insisted on power projection beyond Indian shores.

4.5 U.S-China Competition

The strategic competition between the U.S and China is an important feature of contemporary dimensions of the Indian Ocean. Evolution of U.S.-China friction can be traced in the transition of global politics parallel to China's rise as economic giant on the global level. The diminishing of post-cold war unipolar order and the advent of Asian century led to convergence and divergence of interests of many nations particularly that of China and U.S. in maritime domain. Change in nature of interests led to the U.S-China friction across the maritime frontiers of Asia and adjoining regions.

In the post 9/11 era the U.S became more engaged in war against terrorism. Invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq opened new fronts of U.S. engagements, which undermined its attention on Asian century. The Obama administration's pivot or rebalance Asia presented a fresh attention to regions along waters of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. U.S. rebalance was based on its commitments ranging from diplomatic, economic, and political efforts (Parker & Anderson 2015). Although, U.S kept on rejecting the notion that the strategy is focused on containing China, but the reconfiguration of U.S global naval fleet to this region sent an alarming message to regional countries particularly to China.

Under this policy towards Asia Pacific, India assumed a critical role because of its potential to be strategic ally (Fly 2018). U.S recognized China and Iran as threats and committed to re-organize naval assets where 60% of its global naval power was committed to this region (Chen 2013). As part of

rebalancing strategy the U.S. undertakings were capable to render strategic implications for the region and beyond. China viewed this policy of U.S. as threat to its growing influence in the Asia-Pacific (Swaine 2012).

The U.S.-China competition became more intense when in 2016 Arbitration Court in Hague gave ruling on disputed islands in the South China Sea, which was against Beijing's claims. China did not accept the ruling while U.S. urged China to abide by the ruling and withdraw its claims. U.S. extended its diplomatic support to Philippine and Japan in particular because both have contesting territorial claims against China in the region (Saha, P 2020). In this backdrop, U.S. began to maintain the noticeable military presence unilaterally and through alliances in the region. Besides having a military logistics agreement with India in 2016 (Torbaty & Idrees 2016), U.S. also stationed marine forces in several regional countries including Australia, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and Philippines. Moreover, trilateral naval exercise "Malabar" was also conducted in July 2017 with participation of US, Japan, and India (Bhaskar 2016). Many analyst believed that U.S. policy of rebalance or pivot had hidden objectives of limiting the China's influence and promoting India as counter force (Hussain 2016).

After Trump's first term elections in 2016, the U.S. presented Indo-Pacific Strategy that declared China and U.S. being in antagonistic relations and designated China a serious challenge to its economic and security interests (Hu 2020). The U.S. in collaboration with allies held freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to secure free passage and have check on China's efforts to reclaim the disputed islands in South China Sea (Gilani 2020). The U.S. began redefining regional military arrangements and in May 2018 renamed command previously responsible for the Pacific Operation (USPACOM) to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). It also introduced Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) by integrating the efforts of Australia, Japan, and India, which already have differences with China, on Beijing's "exploitation, coercion, and corruption" as highlighted by Mike Pompeo (Agrawal 2020).

The U.S. policies and undertakings in the Indo-Pacific and more specifically in South China Sea have irked Beijing, which sees its claims on Islands justified according to international law. The China's response against U.S. and other claimants in the region include military, diplomatic, and economic dimensions. To maintain its sovereign claims in the region China has been engaged in multi-pronged sea control strategy based on naval modernization, developing military facilities in the Paracel and Spratly islands, and strategic posturing (Grossman 2019). In 2018, while commenting on China's military advances in the contested islands, Commander

USINDOPACOM Admiral Philip Davidson noted *"PLA will be able to challenge the U.S. presence in the region, and any forces deployed to the islands would easily overwhelm the military forces of any other South China Sea-claimants"* (Davidson 2018). These developments testified China's military commitment for securing its interests across the region.

Besides this China frequently undertook strategic posturing in hotly contested region of South China Sea. In April 2018, China held country's largest naval parade in which 10,000 personnel, 48 naval vessels, aircraft carrier the Liaoning, and 76 fighter jets took part (Westcott et al., 2018). China held joint maritime exercises with regional and extra-regional navies to project its power in the region. With massive military developments and posturing, China sent a strong message to its regional adversaries as well as the U.S.

Parallel to development of military bases and posturing to deter rival powers in the region, China adopted economic initiative based on idea of shared prosperity. In 2013, Chinese President unveiled Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) having land route Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and maritime routes 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) (Yuan 2019). BRI anticipated regional economic integration by building land connections between China and Europe via Eurasia and the maritime connectivity stretching from the part of the Pacific to the Mediterranean via Indian Ocean (Upadhyaya 2020).

China invited all countries along the routes of BRI for joining this project and avail benefits of connectivity. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is vital project of BRI which provides China direct and quick access to warm waters of the IO through Gwadar (Malik 2012). It is argued that the connectivity amongst continents via BRI is the biggest challenge to U.S. global dominance (Tahir & Ejaz 2020). Therefore, the U.S. views BRI with great skepticism and label it "debt trap diplomacy" aimed at attaining the Chinese economic expansion and building of military might (Gilani, 2020).

China is also pursuing to increase its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. China naval development aim to counter challenges to its sovereignty and territorial claims in South China Sea and undo threats from rivals (India and U.S). China's navy has been active in antipiracy operations across the Indian Ocean. To increase the abilities for countering security challenges and deterring U.S, China stresses upon the advancement of its military in the IO (Cordesman & Toukan 2014).

4.6 China-India Competition

Ever since the beginning of transition of global power politics, China and India have been major players in the Indo-Pacific region. Evolving nature

of their interests have brought both powers into a complex interaction along the maritime domain. The energy that passes through the IO SLOCs is critical for economic interests of both (China and India). China's 80 % energy pass through the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, while same proportion of India oil import travel through this region (Kaya & Kılıç 2017).

Considering the growing importance of IO for economic progress, both (China & India) regard control of this region vitally important as they share a history of hostile relations along the borders. The feeling of mistrust and perceived threat have resulted into strategic contest between them along maritime domain. Although both nations do not openly declare the competition between them but their undertakings demonstrate the ongoing rivalry between them.

4.6.1 China's Strategic Ventures

China strategic focus and the presence in the IO is mainly driven by the need of securing the maritime routes. Beijing is cognizant of the strategic vulnerabilities of having no overland connection to the IO and threats to its energy security within the narrow chokepoints particularly Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca. The China's oil imports that pass through the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca are estimated as 40 % and 82 % respectively (Brewster 2018). The narrowness of Strait of Malacca and possibility of it being obstructed by adversary has always been matter of great concern for Beijing. To overcome the geographic limitations and strategic vulnerabilities China is pursuing strategy of establishing relations with IO littoral states to use their maritime facilities. Furthermore, China is also developing overland connections to the IO through the geography of Myanmar and Pakistan. For many IO littoral states China serves as a balance in interaction with other powers such as the U.S. and India (Kaplan 2009).

Geographically there are fewer transit points in the Indian Ocean as it is mostly a closed water body. China's geographic limitations do not allow it to access and control the chokepoints easily, which are crucial for China's economy. To overcome limitations, China to pursued strategy "String of Pearls" for establishing the maritime linkages and access facilities of its allies. China established relations and developed maritime platforms in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Maldives. It is argued that China's strategy of developing commercial and naval platforms replicates the U.S. policy of forward presence in IO since 1945 (Brewster 2018). However, China has always rebutted the reports of having military use of ports developed under this strategy (The Hindu, 2012).

China had long been a nation focused on its land and coastal frontiers. However, China's economic boom and growing significance of overseas waterways transformed strategic vision to sea based thinking. This led to the evolution of China's military policies based on naval operations beyond its coast to other oceans particularly the Indian Ocean. In 2015, the shift in China's Military Strategy was signaled with the launch of Defence White Paper that insisted on safeguarding national sovereignty, maritime interests, securing strategic SLOCs and overseas. (Chinese Ministry of National Defense (2015).

In accordance with maritime vision strategy, China embarked on various naval expansion programs to enhance its reach beyond the Pacific Ocean. Modernization and expansion of China's military has potential to enhance its ability of power projection in the Indian Ocean (Brewster 2018). To maintain its naval presence and compensating the geographic constraints, China has been active in anti-piracy deployments in the western Indian Ocean for over a decade. The PLAN has been active in anti-piracy deployments since 2008 and has stationed surface ships for operations (Minot-Scheuermann 2016).

The anti-piracy operations serve as the reason for PLAN deployment in the Ocean. According to a report China is further strengthening this deployment through further induction of *"latest guided missile destroyer and frigate in the fleet of naval ships participating in anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean"* (TET 2019). More so, the development of Djibouti naval base also manifests the enduring commitment maintaining direct naval presence. Scholars believe that China's interests across the Region have expanded enormously thus China may look for an Indian Ocean fleet for deterring adversaries and securing its interests. (Colley 2021).

4.6.2 India's Strategic Imperatives & Strategy

India's strategic imperatives are linked with long awaited dream of being dominant player in the Indian Ocean. Indian officials regard the ocean as "India's Ocean" (Scott 2006). Indian policy makers in New Delhi consider the leading role in the ocean as inevitable because as it is India's backyard (Berlin 2006). India is uncomfortable with the emerging role of transnational powers. Many Indian scholars believe that the biggest barrier to India's regional or global standing is the constant rise of red dragon (China) in its backyard.

Indian strategists believe the prerequisite for India's global aspirations is to secure the control of regional oceanic waters. However, China's growing linkages with regional ports and maneuvering of PLA navy are biggest impediments in the way to realizing leadership dream. India views China's engagements with IO littorals as efforts to keep India out of regional

strategic balance or its encirclement in maritime domain (Brewster 2014). Therefore, India regards alignment with IO littorals and extra-regional (U.S & QUAD) nations necessary to contain China factor and maintain its preeminence in IO.

In contrast to China, geography offers short maritime routes to India, which make transit across the IO easier. Given the geographic advantage, India has been developing relations with IO littorals and others to neutralize China's influence. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi has been pursuing two complimentary approaches: "Act East Policy" and "Neighborhood First Policy" aiming to consolidation of India's control through containment of China. (Kaya & Kiliç 2017). As part of balancing strategy, India developed strategic partnership with various IO littorals including Iran, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

The U.S. and India partnership is essential segment of India's anti-China strategy. The U.S and India, both share a common threat perception of China's emerging power in the broader Indo-Pacific in general and the Indian Ocean in particular. Defence Framework Agreement 1995 and U.S-India Defence Relationship 2005, paved the way for defence cooperation which included strategic dialogues, multilateral operations cooperation, and missile defense (Wojczewski 2016). Under cooperation agreements, both countries carried out joint operations on all three legs of defence (land, air, and sea). Both countries held the joint naval maneuvering and drills in narrow Strait of Malacca aimed to project a sense of alignment against the China (Wojczewski 2016).

The Indo-U.S alignment, explicitly against the China, became more visible under the Obama's Pivot or Rebalance to Asia policy followed by Indo-Pacific Strategy under Trump administration. Under "Pivot Policy" India was considered as the "Regional Anchor" for rebalancing power in the Asia-Pacific. While Indo-Pacific Strategy referred India integral part of efforts against China's expansion. The cooperation between the two saw new heights when India and U.S signed "Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)" in August 2016 that permitted either side to use military facilities under their control on a reimbursable basis (Tahir & Ejaz, 2020). This growing cooperation was reinforced by maritime and military strategies focused on balancing the strategic equation in the IO and adjoining regions.

India is also pursuing a policy of establishing relations with regional countries. India considers relations with Iran vitally important for its energy security and commercial interests. India attempts to enhance its reach across IO and beyond through Chabahar port deal with Iran and "International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC)". Through Iran (Chabahar Port and

INSTC), India envisioned to establish the connectivity that will undermine the viability of BRI and CPEC.

India has extended its China centric strategy towards the nations of East Asia. Like Iran in west Asia, Indonesia in the East Asia is located near strategically important Malacca Strait. India developed strategic relationships with Indonesia to keep an eye over the Malacca strait. India is developing a port at Sabang, which is in proximity to Indian controlled Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Scholars believe that common perception about China, determined the India-Indonesia ties to undo challenge of Chinese influence in the oceans (Mittal 2020). India and Indonesia displayed their concerns against BRI and thus cooperating to outweigh the impact of this project. The port call of INS Sumitra at Sabang port further crystalized India's intentions to ensure robust naval presence in the East Asia (Panada 2018). The development of Chabahar and Sabang will enable India to monitor China's vessels and delay movement when deemed necessary.

Besides the strategy of infrastructure development in friendly countries, India also pursued consolidating maritime cooperation with regional and extra-regional nations. Under this strategy India has been undertaking bilateral and multilateral maritime exercises with IO littorals and others. Naval exercises of MILAN and MALABAR are the most prominent initiatives that bind the Indian naval interests with other likeminded countries. These maritime exercises with participation of various nations serve as part of India's naval diplomacy and power projection practices in the region. Through these exercise India consolidates the linkages for interoperability required for countering the common threats in the maritime domain. Multilateral exercises manifest the India's resolve for synergizing maritime cooperation and interoperability to secure maritime trade and maintain influence.

5. STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND PAKISTAN

In 21st century, as predicted by many strategists, the Indian Ocean emerged as hotly contested water body where China, India, and the U.S have been engaged in covert and overt competition. Given the emerging situation in the Indian Ocean and the varying nature of Pakistan's relations with China, India, and the U.S., Pakistan is exposed to multifaceted challenges and opportunities. Either it is China v/s U.S or China v/s India, Pakistan has become part of this strategic competition across maritime domain.

Pakistan is one of the important littorals having economic and security interests fundamentally linked to IO. *"Pakistan has 1001 KM long coast with 240,000 Sq Km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and 50,000 Sq Km extended continental shelf"* (PN, 2018). Geographically, Pakistan's position along waters

of IO is of great strategic importance as it is near to the Strait of Hormuz from where gulf oil bound for various destinations of the world pass on daily basis. Pakistan's own economy is highly dependent on this ocean as over 90 % of trade is carried out through this SLOCs of IO.

Economical, Pakistan heavily rely on the international trade carried through the IO waters. Coastline of over 1000 KM having trading ports and abundant marine resources form the backbone of Pakistan's economy. Harbors and ports including Karachi Port, Bin Qasim Port, and the Gwadar port are major maritime spots that support Pakistan's maritime trade. It is estimated that 95 % Pakistan's trade is carried out through the sea (Alam 2019). Furthermore, the oil import that run the economy of Pakistan is entirely based on the Indian Ocean.

Pakistan's security interests are associated with this region owing to historical rivalry with India, intense arms race, Indian aspirations of being regional hegemon and the quest for blue water navy posed serious security challenges to Pakistan (Ahmed 2014). The use of maritime domain by terrorists, smuggling, illicit trafficking of weapons, humans, and drugs are serious concerns for Pakistan. Given the nature of security challenges and the growing significance of the Ocean for economy and defence, the security of the waterways is the fundamental strategic interest of Pakistan in the region. The China-India rivalry, growing Indo-US partnership, and China's developments under BRI, form critical characteristics IO's strategic outlook. Hence, the developing scenario in the IO presents a complex strategic environment for Pakistan.

5.1 Challenges to Pakistan

Pakistan is an important state of the Indian Ocean and pivotal in emerging geopolitical and geo-economic landscape. The challenges to Pakistan's interests mainly emanate from the traditional means. India's objectives and strategies present a continuous threat to Pakistan. Besides this, the Indo-US nexus also pose challenge to the CPEC and Gwadar port.

5.1.1 India's Bid for Hegemonic Role and Naval Modernization

India's aspirations of attaining the dominant role across the Indian Ocean is major challenge to Pakistan. As reflected in India's maritime strategies and policies, its objective to attain dominant and policing status in the Indian Ocean. Given the historical animosity between South Asian nuclear neighbors, India's aspirations present serious threat to Pakistan. As part of its hegemonic designs and efforts to isolate Pakistan, New Delhi has been against

Pakistan's inclusion in India Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (Mitra 2020) and did not invite Pakistan for IONS 10th anniversary session held in Kochi, India (Azmi 2019). Hegemonic approach of India parallel to unresolved conflicts exhibits the possibility of conflict between India and Pakistan. India's naval engagement across the IO threatens Pakistan's commercial and security interests near Strait of Hormuz. The network of maritime platforms gives India strategic edge over other littoral states.

Besides the expansionist and hegemonic maritime aspirations, India's Naval Modernization program is also creating a security dilemma in the maritime domain. To realize the dream of leadership in the ocean, India has been pursuing the naval modernization program for last few decades. It is argued that intensive modernization program have resulted in the "blue water capabilities" of Indian Navy (Sethi 2014). The Blue water navy as described in India's Maritime Doctrine 2015, is the ability of naval forces undertake distant operations far from the national coast without needing to return to home ports for refueling and Indian navy qualifies to be the blue force (Kaushik 2019). India's aggressive naval modernization became more visible when it inducted aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* in 2013 and INS *Arihant* nuclear submarine in 2016. Besides this India has also launched INS *Vikrant* second aircraft carrier, which is in service since 2022. India's aspirations behind this massive capacity building are to increase naval capabilities for controlling the ocean which is causing a security dilemma among other regional countries particularly Pakistan. The security challenges emanating from India's gigantic naval modernization necessitates the necessary measures by Pakistan to defend its interests in the maritime domain.

5.1.2 Indo-U.S Nexus in the Indian Ocean

India and the U.S have developed strong strategic ties over last fifteen years. President Obama considered India a strategic partner and reconfigured relations with India for meeting the common challenges. India was regarded as critical ally in Obama's Pivot or Rebalance policy. Followed by this, Indo-Pacific strategy also recognized India as the strategic partner. India and U.S view China's rise as common threat in oceanic bodies. India's primary interest for forging relations with U.S is to rise to the status of regional power while U.S views India as part of counter balance for China (Khan 2017). The defence cooperation is determined by their interests in joint patrols in the Indian Ocean, naval cooperation, and the convergence on regional issues.

To enhance the defence cooperation and compliment India's maritime capability U.S. provided P8 class aircraft capable of detecting submarines and carrying out anti-submarine operations (Khan 2017). The growing Indo-

U.S cooperation is not only contributing to efforts against China but also offering India an opportunity to securing dominant role in the Indian Ocean. However, Pakistan's relations with U.S. has never been on the long term and mutually beneficial grounds. Therefore, the nature and level of engagement between India and U.S. vis-à-vis maritime domain has become a challenge to Pakistan's economic, security, and strategic interests in the region.

5.1.3 Opposition to CPEC

CPEC is the flagship project of multipronged China's strategy of BRI. The successful execution of CPEC and realization of envisioned economic connectivity under this project is the biggest challenge amidst U.S. skepticism about BRI, India's opposition to CPEC, and the security challenges in the region. U.S. is skeptic about the investments under BRI and consider it China's "Debt trap Diplomacy" designed to enhance its military and economic might (Gilani 2020). In 2019 U.S. attempted to create a narrative against the CPEC through saying that this investment would push Pakistan into debt burden which will compromise Islamabad's interests (Iqbal 2019). U.S. statement highlights the anti-CPEC approach reflecting U.S-China competition in the region. Besides promoting anti-CPEC narratives U.S is also cooperating with India to counter the strategic implications of CPEC.

India's opposition to CPEC can considered as part of ongoing Indo-China competition driven by geopolitical considerations. Since the advent of idea of CPEC, India has been hostile to it because of the route that passes through Gilgit Baltistan to China. India believes that CPEC route violates its territorial integrity (Pundit 2018). Moreover, U.S. also showed support to India's claims when Defence Secretary said that the project passes through disputed area (Iqbal 2017). Gwadar is the critical part of CPEC and operationalization of a seaport at Gwadar to optimal level will establish connectivity that will make Pakistan a regional trading hub. Therefore, India seems uncomfortable with handing over Gwadar port to China. Given this opposition, India is pursuing disruptive schemes that pose serious security challenges to CPEC. Capture of Indian spy agent Kulbushan Yadhav and detection of Indian linkages with Balochistan insurgency; indicate India's approach to sabotage CPEC and Gwadar port.

5.2 Choices for Pakistan

Pakistan's geostrategic location has enhanced its significance in contemporary competitive realm of the Indian Ocean. The choices to deal with the evolving challenges in the Indian Ocean are also driven by Pakistan's geography where convergence or divergence of competing powers is quite

visible. However, a prudent and informed decision-making is essential to outweigh the aforementioned challenges. Some of the choices available with Pakistan are as follows:

5.2.1 Pak-China Maritime Security Cooperation

China is rapidly growing economy and its growth is heavily dependent on the Indian Ocean. The imports of oil from Gulf destined for China and the Chinese export of finished goods to global markets mostly pass through the critical SLOCs of the Indian Ocean. Given the increasing significance of the Indian Ocean and the existing security dilemmas particularly the Malacca Dilemma, China is pursuing strategic cooperation with IO littorals to secure SLOCs and countering the security challenges. Most of the states where China has established platforms are vulnerable and may not be able to deal with India's concerns about growing presence of China along their coasts. However, Pakistan is an exception in comparison to other littorals because it has relatively more important geographic location and strong military complimented by nuclear arm on all three forms of warfare. More so, both Pakistan and China share common security perception towards India. It is argued that the China-Pakistan collaboration will be critical for maintaining strategic equilibrium with Indo-US nexus in the Indian Ocean (Tahir & Ejaz 2020). Therefore, consolidation of maritime cooperation between the two states will be instrumental for Pakistan to outweigh contemporary challenges in the region.

Pakistan's geostrategic location and overland connections established through CPEC offer China an alternate to its traditional route stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to South China Sea route. The connectivity from Kashghar to Gwadar port will directly connect China to the Indian Ocean and avoid the security risks emanating from ongoing India-China, US-China, and QUAD-China competition in the Indian Ocean and broader Indo-Pacific. In this context China needs strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean, however, PLA navy is less experienced in undertaking operations in distant waters. Pakistan, being part of CMF's dedicated task forces, has valuable experience of navigation in the different areas of the Indian Ocean (Ali 2019). Besides Pakistan's experience of navigation, China's advancements in naval warfare technology make it important for both countries to have collaboration to counter common challenges. The combination of Pakistan's familiarity about the region and the China's modern naval technology will be crucial to secure shared interests in the regional maritime domain.

5.2.2 Multilateral Maritime Security Frameworks

Multilateral maritime security arrangements are example of diplomatic function of naval forces. Pakistan is part of many multilateral forums designed to preserve shared goals. As highlighted in Maritime Doctrine 2018, Pakistan's prime focus is to preserve the freedom of navigation in seas. In this respect, PN navy has always been forward looking to initiate and participate in the collaborative forums to enhance interoperability for reaching out the shared objectives in maritime domain. In this backdrop, PN initiated multinational naval exercise "AMAN" which is taking place biennially since 2007. AMAN reflects Pakistan's resolve to promoting stability and order at sea through cooperation and interoperability. It is argued that AMAN exercise is significant balancing act to India's multilateral arrangements as it engages regional and extra-regional navies (Tahir & Ejaz, 2020).

Regular AMAN exercises allow Pakistan to undo Indian efforts to isolate Pakistan and enhance cooperation in maritime domain. Pakistan's multilateral efforts like AMAN also outweigh India's efforts to keep Pakistan out of regional forums like IORA, which is an intergovernmental organization. Besides countering India's anti-Pakistan schemes, AMAN exercise offers opportunity of integrating multinational efforts to fight threat of terrorism at sea (Hunter 2021). IONS is another multilateral platform where Pakistan's proactive role will be helpful to counter the India's hegemonic designs. IONS having members from South Asia, West Asia, East Africa, South East Asia, and Australia provided an opportunity to pursue Pakistan's maritime interests.

5.2.3 Multilateral And Inclusive CPEC

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is often regarded as the game changer for not only Pakistan and China but for the whole region. CPEC through Gwadar has potential to integrate the region of Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Africa. Therefore, an inclusive approach to this project will make Pakistan pivotal for the interests of participating countries. Therefore, it is essential for Pakistan to transform this project from bilateral to multilateral. Many regional and extra-regional countries have shown interests in CPEC which will make this project vital for economic interests and the convergence of many will also be instrumental to undo anti-CPEC narratives and schemes.

Besides making CPEC connectivity inclusive, linking Gwadar port of Pakistan and Chabahar port of Iran bear the potential of forging larger connectivity. Pakistan and Iran has already shown interest to connect both ports as sister ports and maintained that operational connectivity between these two ports will complement each other (Correspondent, 2017). The

prospects of making this connection between the two ports are more visible after the Iran-China strategic cooperation deal signed in March 2021. This strategic partnership deal formally brings Iran into China's multi-trillion dollar BRI connectivity (Staff, 2021). The deal will balance India's influence in Chabahar port development and open avenues of complementary cooperation between sister ports. Furthermore, enhanced participation in CPEC and Gwadar-Chabahar linkage will make Pakistan a melting pot of interests of many regional nations.

6. CONCLUSION

The contemporary outlook of the Indian Ocean is characterized by strategic competition between regional and extra-regional as well as existing and emerging powers. Pakistan, owing to its strategic location and varying nature of relations with competing powers, cannot remain out of the evolving strategic construct. The evolving challenges of strategic competition have put Pakistan in strategic quagmire. Relationships between China and Pakistan have reached new heights with the advent of multibillion-dollar project of CPEC. This project has brought Pakistan to the heart of ongoing triangular competition. Once successfully executed, CPEC will change Pakistan's stature from a fragile country to economic hub of the region. Therefore, India's hegemonic aspirations, Indo-U.S. convergence on China factor, and cooperation to sabotage CPEC are the strategic challenges for Pakistan. Furthermore, India's efforts to keep Pakistan out of the regional multilateral forums, the looming danger of non-state actors, and maritime terrorism are imminent threats to Pakistan's interests.

Keeping in view the challenges informed foreign policy choices will be crucial for Pakistan in the evolving strategic picture. Pakistan should formulate a foreign policy according to the changing dynamics of the global geopolitics. Pakistan needs to pursue a pragmatic approach, not putting all of its eggs in one basket, to maintain relations with the U.S and China. At the same time, seeking cooperation with China to enhance naval power would be essential to counter India's hegemonic schemes and address the challenges posed by illicit networks. Moreover, Pakistan should also expand participation in regional maritime security frameworks to enhance interoperability and confront Indian efforts of keeping Pakistan out of the regional construct.

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