

Rivalry of India and China in the Indian Ocean: Challenges for South Asian Littoral States

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Abstract

The geographical proximity of India and China to the Indian Ocean has set the stage for a unique geopolitical situation. The bordering states of the Indian Ocean, a region of contrast in terms of politics, population, and economy, has given rise to a complex geopolitical framework where interests of the local states and foreign nations intersect. In the 21st century, the Indian Ocean has risen to prominence in terms of global trade and geopolitical focus. The different political ideologies of India and China shape their strategic perceptions and orientation. The conflict between India and China will have an impact on the economic and political connectivity of neighboring states, and China's increasing influence in the region of the Indian Ocean will change the geopolitical dynamics of the bordering nations. Mutual dialogue should be highlighted for building confidence and identifying the areas of cooperation between India, China and their neighboring states.

Keywords

India, China, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean, Superpower

Introduction

Since the 2nd half of the 20th century the Indian Ocean and its bordering states have been growing in significance for geopolitics and global geostrategy (Bouchard & Crumplin, 2010). It is a region of diversity in terms of politics, population, economy, environment, and a complex geopolitical framework where the interests of foreign and local states intermingle (Bouchard & Crumplin, 2010). The Indian Ocean region has a distinct history and regional security architecture (Davis and Balls, 2019). It should be recognized as a distinct region, rather than the least important wing of the Indo-Pacific (Davis & Balls, 2019). In recent decades the Indian Ocean has evolved and expanded into a central role in world politics and geostrategy (Lebedeva, 2020) and Indian Ocean geopolitics is more than specific uses of the sea by large foreign powers (Bouchard, 2015). Evolving geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean gives rise to an interesting and complex chain of cooperation and conflict (Karim, Kayani & Bukhari, 2022).

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The main problem for world governments is the shrinking policy space as a result of power diffusion and hyper connectivity (Prantl and Goh, 2022). The Indian Ocean is becoming the focal point for assessing the future security challenges of Asia (Hornat, 2016). The importance of the Indian Ocean as a geopolitical focal area is being acknowledged, and the strategic interests of multiple actors involved converge and overlap to a significant extent (Cordner, 2015). Indian Ocean geopolitics is more than specific issues and military uses by large foreign powers (Houbert, 2015) and the region is a prominent arena of international politics (Iyer, Mukhopadhyay and Iyer, 2021) and also in terms of security (Asef & Alam, 2020). The Indian Ocean is considered to be the theater of conflict and competition in the 21st century (Venkatesh, 2016) and international relations are in dynamic transition with the emergence of an assertive China, India and the United States (US) as key players (Khorana & Choukroune, 2016).

Since the Cold War ended, the Indian Ocean region has been going through a period of instability and rearrangement (Bouchard & Crumplin, 2010). Taking into account the region's strategic significance, along with the involvement of the United States and the entry of China, the Indian Ocean will be at the forefront of global geopolitics in coming decades (Bouchard & Crumplin, 2010). Control over access to the Indian Ocean is seen through a lens of security, and China's growing maritime interests are strategically important (Brewster, 2017). Due to overlapping strategic interests, elements of confrontation between India and China are more apparent than those of cooperation (Thoker & Ramzan, 2018).

Literature Review

Western commentators routinely underestimate the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean (Rumley and Chaturvedi, 2015). In the 21st century, global trade and geopolitical focus is once again on the Indian Ocean (Nath, 2017). China is emerging as a key player in the Indian Ocean (Mayilvaganan & Ramya, 2015), a fast-emerging phenomenon that India has been concerned about (Nath, 2017). China's diplomatic and economic engagements with the Indian Ocean littorals and its naval activities have become increasingly significant (Khurana, 2016) and economic engagement with China has strategic consequences for the smaller nations (Malik, 2018). The Indian Ocean is important due to its strategic location and geopolitical significance (Hayat, Sajjad and Shahzad, 2020) and has increasingly become an area of contention between India and China (Krothwal & Kumar, 2023). The new focus of international politics lies in the Indian Ocean (Jash, 2015).

Current strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is similar to when Great Britain announced the withdrawal of its forces from East of the Suez (Mohan, 2010). The strategic significance of the Indian Ocean is influenced by India's growing power ambition and the US-led policy to establish India as a counterweight to China (Kazmi, 2023). China's rise as a significant economic superpower has been accompanied by an increase in its global footprint (Soaliha, 2022). The geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and Chinese attempts to penetrate the region has been posing a security challenge to Indian strategy (Mann, 2017). The Indian Ocean is at the core of India's maritime strategy (Pattanaik, 2016) and is an important stage for the strategic competition between India and China (Nguyen et al. 2022).

Global strategic and economic center of gravity is shifting towards Asia, and the region around the Indian Ocean is gaining significance (Robinson, 2016). The Sino-Indian rivalry at sea looks set to persist (Collin, 2019) and it is important for the regional states to access the Indian Ocean for their economic stability and growth (Karad, 2019).

Discussion

Conflict and cooperation in the Indian Ocean are influenced by a multitude of factors (Singh, 2015). The US views Indian power as a solution to the rise of China (Gilboy & Heginbotham, 2013). China and India have different political ideologies and therefore their strategic orientations differ (Bhaskar, 2010). The relation between India and China is based on the developments in the Indian Ocean (Bastos, 2014). Global interest in the Indian Ocean led to the colonization of the South Asian subcontinent (Agarwala & Chaudhary, 2021), with the interest of the global powers continuing its strategic dominance in the region (Agarwala & Chaudhary, 2021). The Indian Ocean has an area of focus where global economic activity intersects political interests, and is home to some of the world's busiest waterways such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz (Fatima & Jamshed, 2020).

The Indian Ocean is the 3rd largest global water body adjoining 34 coastal states (Soaliha, 2022). The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is gaining importance in Indian Ocean geopolitics, and apart from the US and France, China holds significant interests in this region (Gurjar, 2019). China's interest can be divided into four categories: dual use infrastructure building, politico-diplomatic focus, connectivity access and military activities (Gurjar, 2019). China's growing influence in the region is a threat to Indian hegemony, and India's stance against the Chinese influence has resulted in a geopolitical paradox (Senevirathna, 2021). While China increased its influence in this region within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India also preserved its traditional sphere of influence (Long et al, 2023). India's involvement in maritime governance is shaped by two concerns, Delhi's drive to counter China's expanding regional influence in the Indian Ocean, and India's pursuit of leadership in that region (Lidarev & Pant, 2022).

India and China share a complex relation ranging from border issues to increased participation in multilateral forums (Khan & Malik, 2023). Global politics have started to influence recent China-Indian border escalations, making it Asia's foremost geopolitical challenge (Ali, 2024). The conflict between India and China will impact political and economic connectivity between the littoral states (Bharti, 2023). As its global significance increases, China is playing a more crucial role in the Indian Ocean region through economic investments, maritime infrastructure projects and naval activities (Khan, Ahmad & Ullah, 2023). Contemporary history has highlighted the significance of controlling the oceans playing a crucial role in global and regional geopolitics (Jain & Gill, 2024). Regional geopolitics will play a pivotal role in determining the strategic interests and interactions of nation states (Singai, Dixit & Reddy, 2023) and the issues between India and China will extend beyond the political impacts on the littoral states (Purushothaman, 2024).

Recommendations

The rivalry and power politics between India and China must be appeased by building mutual trust and taking various confidence building measures. Diplomacy is an area where all sides can rely more upon rivalry and hostility. Naval forces should reorient themselves for mutual cooperation to establish regional peace and stability. Joint maritime centers should be established at important ports to enable rapid and coordinated responses to smuggling, piracy, humanitarian disasters, illegal migration, environmental incidents, and search-and-rescue operations. For maintaining the stability and peace of the Indian Ocean there could be a maritime regional organization comprising littoral states of the Indian Ocean and other major players like USA, Japan, and China etc. This regional platform will be effective to maintain peace. Abiding by the rules and regulations by the member states and other sea farers, tranquility can be established in the Indian Ocean region.

Conclusion

The Indian Ocean during the peak of the Cold War was a playground of the superpowers which resulted in the adaptation of the UN resolution declaring the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace. However, the Zone of Peace theory was never functional in the Indian Ocean. At present the US has the highest number of bases in the Indian Ocean while China and India are in a race to gain a foothold for their strategic dominance. This situation is not only mounting pressure on the littoral states but also destabilizing the whole region. In this present context it is more important to build mutual confidence and erase mistrust. To build mutual confidence it is more important to emphasize dialogue and identify the areas of cooperation. Only mutually beneficial cooperation can foster Asian peace and economic renaissance. An Indian Ocean based maritime regional organization can be a potential common platform from which member states can eradicate their mistrust and cooperate with each other.

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