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Maritime Security Issues and Geostrategic Competition in Indian Ocean Region: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan

Abstract

The strategic maritime environment of the Indian Ocean (IO) has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades. The shift in regional focus from territorial to maritime borders has had a profound impact on international relations, driven by evolving defense and security dynamics. This paper explores the historical context of maritime geopolitics in the Indian Ocean and examines the growing presence and competition among the United States, China, and India as the primary strategic players. The United States, in strengthening its partnership with India, seeks to counterbalance China's expanding influence in the region. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aims to consolidate its economic and strategic footprint under its "Common Future, Common Growth" vision. This paper analyzes the hegemonic struggle in the Indian Ocean and presents policy recommendations for Pakistan's maritime strategy.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Geopolitics, Maritime Security, Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific Strategy, CPEC, Strategic Competition, U.S.-China Rivalry

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Abstract

The strategic maritime environment of the Indian Ocean (IO) has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades. The shift in regional focus from territorial to maritime borders has had a profound impact on international relations, driven by evolving defense and security dynamics. This paper explores the historical context of maritime geopolitics in the Indian Ocean and examines the growing presence and competition among the United States, China, and India as the primary strategic players. The United States, in strengthening its partnership with India, seeks to counterbalance China's expanding influence in the region. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aims to consolidate its economic and strategic footprint under its "Common Future, Common Growth" vision. This paper analyzes the hegemonic struggle in the Indian Ocean and presents policy recommendations for Pakistan's maritime strategy.

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean is one of the seven notable oceans on the globe. In this regard, it has become the center of ever-increasing geostrategic competition among

major powers, particularly China, India, the USA, Japan, and Australia. There are several reasons behind the importance of the Indian Ocean. The most argued territories lie in the area of the Indian



Ocean. It is the busiest route of international trade. It was also one of the focal points for the superpower competition during the Cold War, and currently, it is once again attracting the attention of great powers due to its geo-strategic importance. Indian Ocean is surrounded by most of the developing countries in the world and it is perhaps this that makes it different from the other oceans. In addition, the ocean is India's eastern border and the greatest density of population in the world is another characteristic of this Ocean (Sharma, 1991). Like other developing countries South Asia is blessed with a long coastline of the Indian Ocean, but unblest with adequate technology to exploit the maritime resources. With the shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean becoming critical to global trade, the emerging sea security challenges are also increasing. Resource competition and economic and political disputes are predominant in the Indian Ocean.

During the past few years, the matters concerning maritime security can be defined under two boundaries. The first one is the domain of traditional forms of naval warfare which included control of the sea, denial of the sea, and projection of force. Most countries have scaled down these activities after the Cold War, but India and Pakistan have been vigorously pursuing expansion and wheeling modern and comprehensive naval capabilities in the South Asian region. The second domain of maritime security problem has to do with violence and other forms of global criminality perpetrated by non-state actors. These include piracy, terroristic activities, gunrunning, smuggling of both drugs and humans and other crimes (Sakhuja, 2014). Nonstate actors from South Asia have established an unprecedented degree of maritime power. They have captured the attention of modern security dialogue because of their aggressive maritime violence that aims to amplify their ideological designs (Bansal, 2010). Therefore, the issues of maritime security violence encompass both older and newer forms of conflict.

Of the five nations connected to the Indian Ocean, India holds a preeminent position because it has the greatest coastline. There are important sea routes in the South Asian region, which stretch from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, and in between these straits lie the exclusive economic zones of Sri Lanka, Maldives, India, Pakistan, and submarines' South Asian maritime boundary issues are confined solely to India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. India and

Pakistan share the Bay of Bengal and the Sir Creek, which are both part of the overlapping disputed maritime boundaries (Karim, 2017).

Historical Significance of the Indian Ocean

Historically, the Indian Ocean has been a crucial maritime domain facilitating trade and cultural exchange between civilizations. The region witnessed the dominance of various powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French, each of whom sought to control the lucrative maritime routes. The ocean played a critical role in colonial expansion, with European powers leveraging their naval strength to establish trade monopolies and exert political influence. During the Cold War, the Indian Ocean was a key theater of geopolitical rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union, as both sought to expand their strategic presence in the region. The establishment of naval bases and military alliances underscored the ocean's importance in global power dynamics (Sharma, 1991). Today, the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean has been revived, driven by the rise of regional and extra-regional actors seeking to assert their influence over maritime trade routes and security frameworks (Brewster, 2015).

Geopolitical Importance and Strategic Competition

In contemporary global politics, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a focal point of geostrategic competition among major global and regional powers, including China, the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The Indo-Pacific strategy adopted by the United States signifies its renewed commitment to ensuring free and open access to maritime routes while countering China's growing influence. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road further highlight the ocean's economic and strategic value. China's increasing investments in ports, infrastructure, and naval capabilities, particularly through its "String of Pearls" strategy, have led to apprehensions among regional actors, particularly India, which views Beijing's expanding presence as a direct challenge to its regional dominance (Sakhuja, 2014). The United States, in response, has strengthened its strategic partnerships with India

and other regional allies to maintain a balance of power in the region.

India, with its extensive coastline and strategic positioning, considers the Indian Ocean central to its security and economic interests. New Delhi has expanded its naval capabilities and reinforced its maritime diplomacy through initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine. India has also engaged in maritime security collaborations with countries like Japan, Australia, and the United States through platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (Karim, 2017). Additionally, the European Union and regional Middle Eastern states, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, have vested interests in the Indian Ocean's security due to its role in global energy supply chains.

Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

In fact, there are plenty of security challenges in the Indian Ocean that create instability at the regional and global levels. Security threats, both traditional and nontraditional like piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, drug and arms smuggling, and environmental degradation are a concern of coastal states and other international stakeholders. Maritime piracy, particularly off the coast of Somalia has threatened global trade as well as the required multinational counter-piracy operations (M. A. Khan, 2015). CMF and EUNAVFOR have undertaken efforts to counter piracy as well as safeguard commercial shipping lanes.

Maritime terrorism is a major issue. In 2008, the Mumbai terror attacks highlighted the vulnerabilities of coastal states to maritime threats following the use of the sea route to infiltrate Indian territory by terrorists. The weakness of maritime governance structures and porous coastal regions continue to be exploited by non-state actors for illegal activities such as human trafficking and arms smuggling (Winner et al., 2012). These threats are exacerbated by the fact that, in several of the South Asian nations, there are insufficient surveillance and response capabilities.

Environmental and Economic Concerns

Apart from security challenges, the region in the Indian Ocean has its fair share of challenges of an

environmental and economic nature. These rising sea levels have also contributed to coral bleaching as well as increasing human and animal casualties from natural disasters. Marine resources have also been overfished and marred by illegal fishing practices, threatening the lives of millions who depend on these for living (Manoharan & Deshpande, 2018). To address these environmental issues, efforts must be made by Indian Ocean states, regional organizations, and international bodies working together.

From an economic point of view, the Indian Ocean is of paramount significance in global trade as it acts as a main conveyance, including good shipping lanes via strategic choke points including the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Bab el Mandeb. The energy transportation through them such as crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Middle East to whole countries of the world depends on these chokepoints. Disruptions in these passages can have major economic consequences (Azmi, 2017) because geopolitical conflicts and security threats have far-reaching economic effects and what affects one nation does not necessarily have a singular rebound effect on commerce in other nations. The regional and global stability of the economy depends on maritime security and the free flow of trade.

Pakistan's Maritime Stakes and Strategic Positioning
Pakistan is situated at the nexus of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East and it has very important strategic stakes in the Indian Ocean. However, Gwadar Port has gained a greater significance as a regional connectivity and trade hub through the further addition of Pakistan's maritime importance by another artery of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Kalim, 2016). China has direct access to the Arabian Sea through the port and thus its economic footprint in the region is further enhanced through the port, which lessens its reliance on the Malacca Strait. CPEC has been touted to pave the way for inroads to economic growth and development of Pakistan's infrastructure but also demands strong maritime security to ensure its interests from external security threats.

Under the auspices of the East Anti Piracy Force (EAPF) in which Pakistan has an active role, Pakistan has participated in multinational naval exercises, counter-policy activities, and port drills.

To address asymmetric maritime threats such as maritime piracy, smuggling, or maritime terrorism, the country has also increased its naval capabilities (Bashir 2010). Nevertheless, challenges remain, with India's growing naval expansion along with the general militarization of the Indian Ocean context for regional stability.

Literature Review

In terms of its strategic, economic, and geopolitical importance, the Indian Ocean has been subject to extensive academic work. Security challenges, economic opportunities, environmental concerns, and strategic ambitions of regional and extra-regional powers have been explored by scholars in the Indian Ocean. It first critically reviews existing literature dealing with these themes in order to have an overall understanding of the contemporary significance of the Indian Ocean.

Geopolitical Competition in the Indian Ocean

Major powers have brought about growing geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean in the sense that several scholars prefer to shed light on the strategic ambitions of these powers for the region. Filip Brewster (2018) states that the Indian Ocean has been turned into a contested space where regional and extra-regional actors try to impose their influence. However, India, China, and the United States play an important role in shaping the geopolitical complex of the region, he says. Scott (2019) also states that the Indo-Pacific has become an idea that helps the regional security framework as a reaction to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy. All of these developments indicate the ocean as a central stage of global power contention. The literature has widely discussed her strategic expansion in the Indian Ocean. Kaplan (2015) states that China's 'String of Pearls' strategy, port and maritime development of the Indian Ocean, represents Beijing's long-term ambition to secure its trade routes and to improve its naval presence. Similarly, Mohan (2017) holds that China's rise in the region threatens India's historical domination in the region through strategic competition, between two Asian giants. Curiously, India's response to China's rise is articulated by Pant (2020), who claims that it is making its Naval capabilities stronger by partnering

strategically with countries like the US, Japan, and Australia through the Quad mechanism.

Maritime Security Challenges

Scholars and policymakers have regarded maritime security in the Indian Ocean as a major concern. Among the region's security challenges are piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing, and human trafficking. Chalk (2010) thoroughly discusses piracy in the Indian Ocean, and in particular, off the coast of Somalia, its effect on global commerce, and the future additional policies to prevent this from occurring. He contends that such multinational naval interventions as the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) are justified by piracy as maritime routes need to be protected. Similarly, there has been a wide study on terrorism and the use of maritime routes for illicit activities. According to KARNTA (2016), terrorist groups make use of the porous coastal regions of South Asia to facilitate the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and personnel. They were reminded of the vulnerability of the sea route in 2008 when terrorists used the sea route to infiltrate Indian territory in the Mumbai attacks (Ganguly, 2018). Official calls have been made to both step up maritime surveillance and coordinate efforts in that region in this capacity.

Economic Significance and Trade Dynamics

The Indian Ocean has been documented as the economic important. The Indian Ocean is an extremely important shipping route, as major shipping lanes cut through the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Bab el Mandeb. Stopford (2009) states that the Indian Ocean is nearly 80% of the world's maritime oil trade. These trade routes have become crucial to the major economies which have created greater strategic competition and investment in port infrastructure. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been debated around economic discussions in the Indian Ocean context. CPEC is claimed by Abid and Ashfaq (2015) as a game-changer for regional trade dynamics and, at the same time, will bring direct access to China to the Arabian Sea through its Gwadar Port. This development's implications for Pakistan's economic growth are considerable and its strategic position in the region is excellent. However, according to Hussain (2019), CPEC's

success is contingent on stable security and governance.

Environmental Concerns and Sustainability

Indonesian environmental problems in the Indian Ocean have received much academic attention. Hoegh-Guldberg and others (2017) warn that climate change-driven coral reef degradation constitutes a serious concern for island states in the Indian Ocean. There has also been the major issue of overexploitation of marine resources. In 2018, Sumaila and Cheung (2018) mentioned the issue of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing as a cause of overfishing and undermining fishing communities' livelihood. These are also oil spills and marine pollution. They also state (White and MacDonald, 2016) that oil spills of tanker accidents and industrial waste dumping continued to damage the marine systems in the Indian Ocean.

Pakistan's Maritime Interests and Strategic Challenges

The areas of Pakistan's geostrategic location and economic interests have been studied to analyze Pakistan's maritime strategy. In his analysis of Pakistan's efforts to improve the quality of its naval capabilities to secure its maritime interests in the face of India's naval building, Siddiqui (2020) maintains that Pakistan's perceived naval deficiencies prompt the country to take steps designed to augment its naval capabilities. The author also observes that Pakistan's involvement in multinational naval exercises like the AMAN series is to ensure regional maritime security.

Pakistan's security in the Indian Ocean is multiple-faced. Zahid (2018) contends that there is a need for a strong maritime security strategy due to the threat of maritime terrorism, smuggling, and piracy. In addition to their presence in the region, Pakistan has to deal with the Chinese, the Indians, and the Americans, all foreign military powers. Moreover, Gul & Iqbal (2019) further state that the maritime governance architecture should be strengthened to effectively govern Pakistan's EEZ and coastal resources. It, therefore, becomes obvious that the Indian Ocean is an unquestionable geopolitical and economic front. The ocean serves as a strategic competition field among China, India, and the US. Due to the nature of the maritime security challenges such as piracy, terrorism and illegal

fishing, solutions have to come in a coordinated regional and international fashion. CPEC is a new economic venture but it also has security and governance challenges along with new opportunities. Secondly, sustainability must be achieved to manage marine resources. Therefore the Indian Ocean is a region where Pakistan's maritime interests are linked and tied to the broader regional dynamics that should be dealt with in a comprehensive and strategic way.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this research is based on mixed methods research that combines data collection techniques in the forms of qualitative and quantitative to examine maritime security issues and geostrategic competition in the Indian Ocean. To make the study complete, the basis of the study is to acquire information from both primary as well as secondary sources. The research has an exploratory and analytical design within the framework of geopolitical, economic, and security dimensions of the Indian Ocean. On the emergent threats of security and impending economic opportunities and the roles of major regional and global players, (the study) intends to assess. In addition to discussing Pakistan's maritime interests and strategic position on the Indian Ocean, the study also evaluates the ocean's political and military relationship with South Asia, India, Pakistan, and other nations of the region.

Data will be collected from different primary as well as secondary sources in order to achieve these objectives. In relation to data collection, primary data will include government documents and policy papers such as official reports, white papers, and strategic documents from Pakistan's Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and Pakistan Navy. These sources will give some insights into national maritime policies and strategic orientation. Structured and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with maritime security experts, diplomats, naval officers, and scholars working on Indian Ocean geopolitics. Pakistani government works on the national security policy within the parliamentary debates and statements by the Pakistani government officials will be analyzed to understand how policy has shifted.

From academic journals, books, and research reports written by international and regional think

tanks, universities as well as research institutions, secondary data will be obtained. To understand geopolitical developments and security incidents in the Indian Ocean, it is proposed to examine the news reports and media analysis carried out by reputed agencies such as BBC, Al Jazeera, The Diplomat, and Reuters. Furthermore, international reports and publications from organizations such as the United Nations, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Such review will be provided as a global perspective of maritime security and the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) will be reviewed.

By questioning the conventional balances of power in the Indian Ocean, in terms of geopolitical and geo-economic flows, the study utilizes a framework of power, security, and economic flows. Policy documents will be analyzed with content analysis, parliamentary debates, and expert interviews with discourse analysis. It will also carry out a comparative analysis of the maritime strategy of the major regional players China, India, the United States, and Pakistan to understand evolving security dynamics. In incorporating qualitative analysis with quantitative data if applicable, the research will have more robust findings.

This study adequately meets the ethical standards that were at play in undertaking interviews and the use of both government and classified documents. All interview participants will give their informed consent for participation in this interview and the data will be maintained in strict confidentiality. Additionally, the research will maintain the standards of academic integrity, so that it does not contain any possible plagiarism, and proper citation of sources will be conducted. Particularly, the limits of the method are exhibited. Some state documents and policy papers may not be publicly available, restricting the scope of analysis. The study also relies on secondary sources, which may contain inherent biases or outdated information. Given the vastness of the Indian Ocean region, the study may not cover all aspects of maritime security in detail.

By employing a rigorous methodological approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative data, this research aims to provide a well-rounded understanding of maritime security issues and geostrategic competition in the Indian Ocean. The findings will contribute to academic discourse and

policy formulation, particularly concerning Pakistan's maritime strategy and regional security challenges.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

An extensive examination of the different meanings of the word geopolitics shows that 'geopolitics are always about power relations within certain space, which usually refers to a state and its territory, and frequently speaks of power relations amongst states' (Mamdouh, 1998:246). We, however, focus on the Geopolitics of Place as the politics of defining and situating 'nation' using geography. As David Newman (2000:305) presents this thought, "The geopolitical imagination and positioning of a country are relatively how the individual identities are contoured to a large extent internally (by the residents of a country) and externally (by others of the constituting system of the globe) and vice versa. It is within the geopolitical imagination of a state where its circumvention may be defined, yet, it is the situatedness of that state in the regional and global system that does much of the dictating. What is termed as 'national' identity and interests is the outcome of social construction. Often, the political elites in a country may have a form of geopolitical imagination that is in conflict with the geopolitical reality perceived by other countries, which causes inter-state friction on the one hand, and action to gain recognition on the other. The position a state is assigned in the global order does not always align with its desired geopolitical standing, as shaped by its geopolitical imagination. This misalignment can often be a source of tension and conflict. The concept of geo-economics has been widely popularized—sometimes even sensationalized—by figures such as Edward Luttwak (1990, 1993), who argue that traditional geopolitics has been replaced by a new paradigm. According to Luttwak, economic power has surpassed military strength, with financial capital becoming more influential than firepower, civilian innovation outpacing military-technical advancements, and market expansion holding greater significance than military presence through bases and garrisons. In this view, states no longer compete for territorial dominance but instead for economic superiority.

While this perspective has gained traction among Western intellectuals and policymakers, the present discussion draws more from the insights of Timothy

Luke (1997, 1998). Luke suggests that economic, cultural, and political globalization, along with the rise of transnational corporate capitalism, is reshaping fundamental principles of world politics, including state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the notion of fixed, place-bound communities. He argues that power is no longer strictly tied to a specific location but operates fluidly across and beyond traditional territorial boundaries. New, more mobile, and artificial spatial arrangements have emerged, necessitating a closer examination of the interactions between states, commercial enterprises, and markets.

At its core, geo-economics examines the economic strategies employed by states. In contrast, geostrategy refers to the application of geographical reasoning in the formulation of national defense strategies (Foucher, 2000:165). Key considerations in geostrategic thinking include factors such as territorial size, location, and strategically significant features like maritime choke points, resource-rich areas, and militarily critical landscapes (Harkavy, 2001:37). Geostrategy is concerned with the practical use of space—both land and sea—as sites of military operations, whether actual or potential. It thus analyzes spatial, physical, and human factors through the lens of warfare and defense planning.

Issues in the Indian Ocean Region

Despite established maritime boundaries, South Asia faces several persistent maritime challenges that extend beyond simple territorial disputes, impacting regional security, economic stability, and international relations (Sakhuja, 2014). One of the primary concerns is the administration of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), which hold immense geostrategic and geo-economic significance for national supremacy. These maritime zones require continuous surveillance and coordinated strategies to protect marine resources and prevent unauthorized activities. Ensuring the security of EEZs is crucial for the economic and strategic interests of the states governing them.

Another critical issue is the safety of international cargo ships navigating through South Asian waters. The Indian Ocean is one of the busiest maritime regions, with approximately 90,000 vessels of high economic value passing through annually (M.A. Khan, 2015). Any disruption in these trade routes—whether due to piracy, conflict, or accidents—could significantly impact regional and global economic

security. Bhutan, Nepal, and other landlocked South Asian nations, whose economies depend heavily on access to seaports in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, have cause for worry.

In addition, littoral zone governance challenges exist due to the fact that these zones are quintessential safe havens for nonstate actors (terrorists and pirates). Weak law enforcement and surveillance systems make it easy for these groups to engage in illicit activities like smuggling, piracy, and terrorism, and they are hard to counter (Sakhuja, 2014). These coastal regions are porous and highly threatening for regional maritime security; due to which criminals are able to evade detection easily. One such example of this vulnerability is the 2008 Mumbai terror attack where militants were able to enter India through a sea route. However, unlike other states in the world, several South Asian states do not have the requisite advanced surveillance and coastal security infrastructure for monitoring illegal immigration and maritime incursions (Winner et al. 2012).

Illegal fishing and territorial encroachment by fishermen penetrating into the exclusive economic zones and disputed waters of other countries are other continuous maritime challenges. Political conflicts, dismal diplomatic tensions, and in some cases even military confrontation have been caused by unauthorized fishing activities. In the past, Pakistani citizens have been arrested for trespassing into disputed maritime areas in several South Asian countries including India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Even though some maritime boundary disputes have been settled between Sri Lanka and India, disputes related to fishing around Kachchathivu Island still exist (Manoharan & Deshpande, 2018). It also arrested hundreds of Indian fishermen who entered Pakistani waters of the Sir Creek, which were contested, then went ahead with repatriation attempts. In the midst of these ongoing maritime issues, there is an immediate requirement for greater regional cooperation, legal frameworks, and intensified security measures in order to secure the maritime interests of South Asia.

South Asia has become a place of pressing security concern due to the militarization of the Indian Ocean. South Asian states have been reported to have provided instances of weapons of mass destruction proliferation either directly or through

the efforts of non-state actors. Moreover, the Indian Ocean is becoming militarized: foreign militaries are increasing their missile capabilities and power projection there, thereby threatening to destabilize the region ("Militarisation Of," [2017](#)). This militarisation is of concern given that South Asia is quickly rising as a chief center of global economic and strategic interests. Now, the Indian Ocean is a contested space where the four nuclear-armed states United States, China, India, and Pakistan are juxtaposed, and three intersecting rivalries have formed between them China, China – India, India-Pakistan. It has destabilized the regional maritime environment due to this geopolitical competition. Furthermore, the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal, aimed at counterbalancing China and Pakistan, has had negative consequences for South Asia's integration into the global economic system. China's "String of Pearls" strategy, which involves expanding its military and naval presence in the region, has heightened India's suspicions, leading to further militarization. In response, India launched INS Arihant, its first-ever nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, causing anxiety across South Asia. This development has intensified the India-Pakistan strategic rivalry, bringing nuclear competition into the maritime domain and further exacerbating the region's conventional military asymmetry (Brewster, 2015).

Another major challenge is the lack of a reliable response system and advanced technological capabilities within South Asian naval forces to counter maritime threats effectively. Following the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, India upgraded its maritime surveillance systems, while Pakistan also took steps to strengthen its naval defenses against illegal incursions into its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). However, both India and Pakistan primarily focus on sea control and sea denial, necessitating a revamp of naval strategies to counter asymmetric maritime threats collectively. The naval capabilities of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives remain less sophisticated compared to those of India and Pakistan. Sri Lanka, for instance, still requires improved high-seas surveillance, while the Maldives lack the necessary infrastructure and remain largely dependent on maritime forces with limited response capabilities (Sakhuja, 2014).

Piracy remains a universal threat to all states with maritime territories. Recognizing its severity, South

Asian nations have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982, formally classifying pirates as "enemies of mankind." Piracy in the region is categorized into low-level, medium-level assaults, and major professional hijackings, with crimes ranging from marine muggings and cargo theft to full-scale vessel hijackings. While piracy is most prevalent in Southeast Asia, West Africa, and South America, it also occurs in South Asia, though with varying degrees of intensity and sophistication. According to the ICC International Maritime Bureau ([2012](#)), between 2007 and 2011, 127 piracy incidents were reported in South Asian waters, with India and Bangladesh experiencing the highest number of attacks, while Pakistan and the Maldives reported no significant piracy incidents. Most of these attacks occurred when cargo vessels were anchored, making them vulnerable to looting. Additionally, Somali pirates have been identified in the western waters of the Maldives, further complicating regional security.

Another critical issue is the illicit drug trade passing through South Asian ports, particularly affecting maritime security forces in Pakistan. The Indian Ocean has become a major conduit for drug trafficking, with South Asia bearing the brunt of the trade. Afghanistan, the world's epicenter of heroin and opiate production, relies on southern trafficking routes to transport narcotics. Drug smugglers frequently use the Pakistani and Iranian coastlines to move illicit substances to the Gulf States, East Africa, and eventually Europe. In 2015, the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency seized over 16,000 kg of heroin, highlighting the scale of the problem. Given the transnational nature of this issue, a coordinated regional effort is urgently needed to combat drug and arms trafficking and ensure maritime security (Azmie, [2017](#)).

Maritime Stakes of Pakistan and Indian Ocean Security

In the post-Cold War era, the Indian Ocean surpassed the Atlantic Ocean in importance for global trade, becoming a central focus for both regional and extra-regional powers. The vast hydrocarbon resources of the Persian Gulf have attracted Western nations, while the geopolitical instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, following U.S. military interventions, has further heightened the strategic relevance of the region. A key factor driving

the Indian Ocean's growing significance is China's Maritime Silk Road initiative, which connects East and Southeast Asia to Northwestern Eurasia, making the ocean a vital corridor for global trade and economic expansion (Khalid, 2013). The region faces numerous traditional and asymmetric security challenges, including piracy, illicit arms trafficking, drug smuggling, naval expansion, nuclearization, and power projection. The Indian Ocean serves as a major artery for global trade, stretching from the Horn of Africa to the Southeast Asian archipelago, eventually linking with the Pacific Ocean to form the Indo-Pacific rim. Within this vast maritime landscape, the Arabian Sea holds a pivotal position, serving as a crucial transit route for energy supplies and commercial shipping. It provides access to key choke points, such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz in the west and the Bay of Bengal and Malacca Strait in the east. In addition to energy shipments, the Arabian Sea facilitates the movement of essential commodities and raw materials for international markets.

Pakistan, strategically located along the Arabian Sea, offers the shortest sea access to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its significance has grown considerably with the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which enhances Chinese exports and energy imports through Pakistani ports, particularly Gwadar (Kalim, 2016). However, the security and stability of the Indian Ocean remain at risk due to piracy, maritime terrorism, and the increasing competition among major powers for influence over its vital sea lanes. The five maritime South Asian nations—Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives—are also engaged in strategic competition to expand their presence and secure dominance in the ocean (Cordner, 2010). Recognizing the emerging security challenges, Pakistan has taken proactive measures to safeguard its maritime interests. It has actively participated in coalition maritime security initiatives, such as the Coalition Maritime Campaign Plan (CMCP), aimed at countering piracy and maritime terrorism in key shipping lanes (Bashir, 2010). Furthermore, Pakistan has significantly enhanced its naval security capabilities by initiating the multinational AMAN series of naval exercises, which have been widely recognized and appreciated by both regional and global powers (Ali, 2017).

Pakistan's strategic maritime location positions it as a key trade hub for China, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The country sits at the entrance of a major strategic choke point, the Strait of Hormuz, through which 72% of the world's oil supply passes. Pakistan also holds an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 290,000 square kilometers, with 95% of its trade conducted via sea routes. Additionally, Pakistan's continental shelf is rich in natural resources, making sustainable exploration and maritime security a critical national priority (Iftikhar, 2016). As the geopolitical and economic dynamics of the Indian Ocean continue to evolve, Pakistan's role as a maritime power is set to expand, reinforcing its importance in the broader Indo-Pacific strategic framework.

Pakistan's primary concern in the Indian Ocean is safeguarding its maritime interests against a range of challenges arising from regional rivalries, nuclearization, and terrorism. An anarchistic political system in the Indian Ocean, where China and India are both greatly expanding their naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean and are engaging in active nuclearization and militarization of the Indian Ocean is very dangerous. Furthermore, the United States, with its European allies and India, is worsening the already enlarged geopolitical complexity of the Indian Ocean, thus raising new security concerns for Pakistan (Azad, 2016).

The rising radicalism and extremism of Islam in the Middle East and the persistent threat of terrorism in South Asia are also regarding Pakistan as another critical issue. There are two key perspectives through which these transnational challenges bear directly on maritime security in the Indian Ocean region. First, the ports and cargo vessels are threatened externally by militant groups and insurgents who may attack the maritime infrastructure, including floating bomb attacks, with other forms of sabotage. Disruption of regional Trade and International Trade will be with such incidents, creating economic stagnation and instability. Also, terrorist networks infiltrate container shipments to smuggle weapons, narcotics, human trafficking victims, and fund their operations, and recruit new members through these illicit activities. This emerging security threat offends Pakistan's national interests and destabilizes Pakistan's overall maritime security and therefore requires strong counteractions and increased

regional cooperation to reduce these kinds of risks (Zhu, 2017).

Data Analysis

To analyze the complex geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics of the Indian Ocean, this study employs an integrated use of comprehensive data analysis through the use of the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. It analyzes to identify major trends, patterns, and strategic interactions of the regional and global actors the impact of maritime security threats, and the economic determinants in Pakistan's strategic position.

Qualitative Analysis

Content and discourse analysis are used to perform the qualitative analysis. Government policy documents, parliamentary speeches, and official reports of Pakistan's Ministry of Defence, Pakistan Navy, and Ministry of Maritime Affairs are systemically studied to identify shifts in national maritime policy and strategic priorities. They offer an insight into Pakistan's developing maritime security strategies and geopolitical sympathies. Discourse analysis is also done on expert interviews and parliamentary debates to assess the policy makers, security analysts, and maritime specialists. This analysis allows an understanding of how the political narratives and security concerns are shaping Pakistan's approach towards maritime affairs. The study focuses on regional security statements and diplomatic engagements of key players, namely India, China, and the United States to determine their strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Secondary sources of secondary sources, such as academic publications, media reports, and international policy papers, are examined using it. This allows information to be classified into the most important themes among maritime security threats, geopolitical competition, economic dependence, and strategic alliances.

Quantitative Analysis

Statistical data and empirical evidence are applied to the quantitative analysis of the findings. The above data is collected from reliable sources like the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the International

Maritime Bureau (IMB). The economic relevance of the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait, and Bab el Mandeb in terms of global energy and commerce are evaluated by looking at trade flow statistics. Also, the frequency and impact of maritime threats in the Indian Ocean are quantitatively analyzed with security incident reports, namely piracy attacks, maritime terrorism, and illegal trafficking cases. Data on fleet sizes, military expenditures, and technological advancements of India, China, and the other regional players are compared to conduct comparative statistical analysis to compare their naval capacities. The study also makes a trend analysis to evaluate transformations in maritime security policies over time. The research considers long-term shifts in the strategic competition or cooperation based on historical data of naval engagements, port developments and regional security agreements among Indian Ocean states. A quantitative assessment of this nature is highly instrumental in the validation and a data-driven approach to understanding regional security dynamics.

Comparative Analysis of Pakistan's Maritime Strategy

The result of this comparative analysis is to compare Pakistan's maritime strategy relative to competing regional states. Rapidly modernizing its own navy, Pakistan has invested its resources in the expansion of its fleet, and in the building of surveillance and maritime infrastructure. Comparatively, Pakistan's strategic partnerships are described through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), especially with India's naval expansion as well as those of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indian Ocean. The framework of international security is reconstructed to assess Pakistan's maritime security policies vis a vis Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as well as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). It also assesses Pakistan's response to nontraditional security threats of piracy, drug smuggling, and human trafficking vis a vis other Indian Ocean littoral states.

Findings and Analysis

According to the findings of this study, the Indian Ocean has become a geopolitical battleground in which the region's powers and extra-regional powers compete for influence. However, the analysis revealed that China's participation in the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI) has equally affected the balance of power in the region in a manner in which it has caused incumbent superpowers to take strategic measures such as through the United States and India. Compared to China's strategic ambitions, China's investments in port infrastructure, such as Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti have provoked a response from the United States and India through intensified naval collaborations and military exercises such as the Malabar series. In addition, the study notes that Pakistan is playing a critical role in this fast-changing security landscape. Pakistan's alignment with China, especially through CPEC & Gwadar Port, has contributed to Pakistan being looked at more strategically in this region. The research also points out that despite improving, Pakistan's naval modernization is still inadequate in relation to India's fast-growing maritime power. India was acquiring aircraft carriers, and nuclear submarines and emphasizing power projection, while Pakistan has concentrated on sea denial strategies and territorial defense. Findings regarding maritime security threats call attention to the fact that piracy, terrorism, and illegal trafficking are threats that continue to afflict regional stability. The statistical analysis of security incidents shows that piracy incidents have decreased in some regions thanks to international counter-piracy efforts but the development of maritime terrorism and illegal arms smuggling are rising. Unmonitored coastal regions continuously pose risk because of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, one that exploited maritime vulnerabilities. The findings economically confirm that the Indian Ocean continues to be an important channel of global trade with the majority of seaborne trade tracking its waters. Amongst the chokepoints of interest to global energy security are the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait and the Bab el Mandeb. The successful operationalization of Gwadar Port and its connection with Central Asia and China directly qualify and define Pakistan's maritime trade potential. Despite these opportunities, the governance, infrastructure deficiency and security aspects need to be addressed fully to reap from these economic opportunities. Furthermore, environmental concerns such as illegal fishing, marine pollution, and climate change-induced sea-level rise pose additional challenges. The research fills in the gaps concerning regional cooperation on environmental sustainability that take into account

collaboration frameworks for the protection of marine ecosystems and the sustainable use of maritime resources.

Integration of Findings

Qualitative and quantitative data, integrated, improves the depth of its analysis to enable a holistic study of Indian Ocean geopolitics. The study balances and bases its study on policy documents, security reports, trade statistics, and expert opinions by cross-referring them. The findings offer a more detailed knowledge about how Pakistan endeavors to balance its interests in the maritime domain within the regional competition.

Discussion

The Indian Ocean has always been an important maritime region because of its rich economic, strategic, and trade importance. During the past few decades, it has become a focal point of competition between major regional and nonregional powers over sea powers. In this context, the implications of study findings on geopolitical competition, maritime security challenges, as well as economic opportunities and Pakistan's maritime strategy in the context of the wider Indian Ocean are explored.

Geopolitical Competition and Strategic Rivalries

The most important finding from this study is increased geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean. Influenced by the growing importance of China, India, and the United States in the region, maritime security and strategic calculation have changed. In the context of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its maritime formative part, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, regional and extra-regional powers have been in competition. China's had great success through port acquisitions and infrastructural investments in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti, and the Maldives, which has led to the term 'String of Pearls' strategy (Brewster, 2018). India and the United States have also countered this with counterstrategies, including military collaborations, naval expansions, and strategic alliances (such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad) (Scott, 2019). India considers China's rising clout in the Indian Ocean a direct rebuff to India's own strategic dominance. In response, India has dramatically increased its naval

potential, strengthened maritime surveillance, and strengthened its relationships with allies such as the USA, Japan, and Australia. India's commitment to maintaining control over vital maritime routes is manifested in the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a strategic outpost (Ganguly, [2018](#)). According to White ([2020](#)), the United States has also strengthened its military partnerships and naval deployments in the region with its Indo-Pacific strategy to counterbalance China's influence while ensuring freedom of navigation and the safety of energy trade routes.

Maritime Security Challenges and Threat Perceptions

The problem of maritime security in the Indian Ocean region is highlighted. Naval conflicts, strategic rivalries, and military build-ups continue to constitute the major security threats. Nonetheless, piracy, terrorism, human trafficking, and illegal fishing among other non-traditional threats such as have also emerged as critical security issues (Chalk, [2010](#)). Although piracy has been greatly reduced with international naval efforts, it remains a sporadic risk. Despite a decrease in the number of piracy incidents, the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean are prone to occasional piracy, and therefore it remains important to maintain vigilance and maritime security cooperation. Piracy activities also gained a decrease in piracy incidents over the years through the participation of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR), and independent naval deployments from India, China, and Japan (Mohan, [2017](#)). One of the persistent concerns of maritime terrorism is in the South Asia region. Such vulnerabilities were exposed by the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which militants used the sea route. However, non-state actors exploit poorly governed maritime zones to smuggle arms, and narcotics and to infiltrate terrorists (Pant, [2020](#)). To counter these growing threats, it is necessary to strengthen among other things, coastal security measures, inter-agency coordination, and invest in maritime surveillance technology. The second challenge is illegal fishing and resource exploitation. The richest fisheries in some of the world's richest fisheries sit in the Indian Ocean, and, unfortunately, this is in jeopardy because of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IU)

fishing that threatens marine biodiversity and economic stability. Economic losses occur for regional countries, especially smaller island states and developing economies—Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh—due to the overfishing by foreign trawlers, predominantly distant water fishing nations China (Sumaila & Cheung, [2018](#)). Addressing this issue requires greater regional cooperation, enforcement of international maritime laws, and sustainable fisheries management policies.

Economic Opportunities and Trade Dependencies

The Indian Ocean serves as a vital artery for global trade and energy transportation. Over 80% of global seaborne trade passes through the region, with crucial chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Bab el Mandeb influencing energy security and trade flows (Stopford, [2009](#)). The study underscores the importance of securing these trade routes to ensure economic stability, particularly for energy-dependent economies such as China, India, Japan, and the European Union. Pakistan stands to benefit significantly from the growing maritime trade in the region, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port. Being at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar has been strategically located which gives Pakistan a unique opportunity to work as a transit hub and as an alternative trade corridor for energy imports of China (Abid & Ashfaq, [2015](#)). However, there are economic opportunities that have to be balanced with security concerns because Pakistan falls short in geopolitics and its regional competition over Gwadar's strategic relevance.

Despite these opportunities, the maritime trade sector in Pakistan is faced with infrastructure, governance, and security risks. To attract greater international investment and trade partnerships, international investments and trade partnerships must take place through better port efficiency, connectivity, and regulatory frameworks. It is also important to maintain stability in the region in order to maintain the uninterrupted flow of maritime commerce.

Pakistan's Maritime Strategy and Regional Considerations

The study reveals that Pakistan's maritime strategy is intricately tied up with the region's security and

economic parameters. Pakistan has modernized its navy somewhat but its capabilities are still much weaker than India's rapidly expanding naval fleet. To offset India's growing influence, Pakistan has adopted sea denial tactics, coastal defense, and strategic cooperation with China (Siddiqui, 2020). Since Gwadar Port's development under CPEC, Pakistan has become more geo-strategically important, but the issues of security and governance challenges still exist. If the port is to succeed, then balance to achieve stability in Balochistan, address regional grievances, and improve connection to Central Asian markets. Additionally, Pakistan's maritime strategy must be conducted with careful sidestepping of its alliance with China while maintaining good relations with other regional actors of the Gulf states and Iran (Kalim, 2016). Such multilateral engagements help Pakistan in retaining its strategic position. However, Pakistan's involvement in such regional security frameworks as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and other multinational naval exercises could help Pakistan play a positive role as a responsible maritime actor.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that the Indian Ocean is a very contested maritime domain where on the one hand economic opportunities and on the other side security challenges coexist. Regional dynamics are therefore shaped by the strategic competition between China, India, and the United States, and comprise issues that smaller states like Pakistan need to navigate through diplomatic means. The study highlights the necessity of mandating Maritime security frameworks, port infrastructure development, and regional cooperation to address maritime traditional and nontraditional security threats. Being located strategically and economically rich, Pakistan needs to boost its maritime capabilities, equip its naval forces with modern technologies and join in regional security moves effectively. This study's findings point to the fact that a clear maritime strategy and sound economic investments in the region combined with regional partnerships can give Pakistan a critical role to play in the Indian Ocean. Long-term maritime security and Pakistan's economic growth will be dependent on sustainable policies, diplomatic agility, and security preparedness.

Recommendations

This study based on the findings proffer several recommendations aimed at improving maritime security in the Indian Ocean, as well as, regional stability and economic growth.

1. They need to strengthen Maritime Security Frameworks, i.e., invest in naval modernization, surveillance technologies, and knowing whom to share intelligence with. Better maritime governance can be achieved through improving collaboration with regional and international security frameworks like IORA and CMF.
2. Pakistan has to actively participate in diplomatic dialogues and strategic alliances pertaining to relations with other regional and extra-regional actors so that the nation remains engaged in a balanced geopolitical arena. Such economic and security benefits can be gained through strengthening ties with Gulf states, ASEAN nations, and African coastal states.
3. Traditional Maritime Policies Development – It is important that Pakistan develops its traditional maritime policies to make the best use of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). National strategies of marines should integrate measures to combat illegal fishing, marine pollution, and environmental degradation.
4. Gwadar Port's development should prioritized through enhanced security and logistical efficiency combined with Port Infrastructure and Trade Connectivity. CPEC and transshipment hubs can help Pakistan play its due role in the global trade networks by strengthening regional connectivity.
5. Coastal Security Frameworks – With maritime terror risks, arms smuggling, and other forms of illegal trafficking, Pakistan will do well to improve its coastal security frameworks. Advanced radar systems deployment, increasing patrolling capabilities, and smart border surveillance can help mitigate the threat to security.
6. Promote Multilateral Collaborative Work on Non-Traditional Threats – This refers to collaborative movement in tackling nontraditional security threats such as piracy, drug smuggling, and human trafficking. International body engagement and

participation in regional naval exercises will help with response capabilities.

7. However, the application of these recommendations will significantly enhance

Pakistan's maritime security, economic opportunity, and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region in the long run.

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