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**GEOPOLITICS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN: SOUTH ASIA'S  
STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN MARITIME SECURITY**

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**Abstract**

*The Indian Ocean is a pivotal maritime zone influencing the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia due to its strategic location and rich resources. This article explores the intricate web of strategic competition among South Asian nations, primarily focusing on how these states leverage their geographical and maritime assets to assert dominance and ensure security. The analysis delves into the increasing militarization of the region, driven by the interests of both regional powers, such as India and Pakistan, and extra-regional actors, including China and the United States. The study begins by mapping the critical sea routes that facilitate substantial portions of the world's maritime trade, highlighting their importance for global energy flows and economic connectivity. The narrative then shifts to the strategic initiatives undertaken by these nations, such as India's "Act East" policy and China's "String of Pearls" strategy, which aim to enhance influence in the Indian Ocean. The competition over these maritime routes has led to an escalation in naval capabilities, including submarine warfare, naval bases, and joint military exercises with allied nations. Furthermore, the article assesses the implications of these developments for regional security and trade, with a particular focus on the potential flashpoints and conflict zones that could destabilize the broader Indian Ocean region. The paper also examines cooperative efforts, such as anti-piracy operations and maritime environmental protection initiatives, that serve as*

counterbalances to the prevailing tensions. In conclusion, "Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: South Asia's Strategic Competition in Maritime Security" provides a comprehensive overview of the strategic calculations reshaping the Indian Ocean's geopolitical landscape, offering insights into both the challenges and opportunities facing South Asia in its quest for maritime security.

**Keywords:** Indian Ocean, maritime security, South Asia, strategic competition, naval capabilities, geopolitical dynamics, regional powers, extra-regional actors, trade routes, militarization.

## Introduction

The Indian Ocean stands out as one of the world's most heavily trafficked maritime routes, creating essential connections among Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific regions. The immense economic significance tied to the Indian Ocean highlights its role as a critical chokepoint for international maritime commerce and for vessels engaged in transporting vital hydrocarbon energy resources (Panneerselvam, 2021). Beyond its economic importance, the Indian Ocean also serves as a vital stage where major global powers seek to exert influence over regional stability and security dynamics. Within the broader South Asian context, this vast ocean has emerged as a complex battleground showcasing competing strategic interests among various regional states (Baruah, 2022). This area has a rich history characterized by numerous invasions, extensive trade interactions, and intricate exchanges with neighboring nations since the emergence of distinct states; nevertheless, the underlying geographic and ethnic conflicts have consistently revolved around the inland territories. In contemporary times, this dynamic has evolved, shifting from a focus solely on these inland regions to encompass the multifaceted complexities of global geopolitics. The coastal nations bordering the Indian Ocean are increasingly cognizant of their substantial stakes in this critical maritime expanse, prompting a necessity for enhanced control over these invaluable maritime zones. This recognition is driven by the imperative to bolster military effectiveness and secure essential economic and political advantages that are vital for maintaining regional influence in the face of competing powers (Grare & Samaan, 2022).

This paper explores the complex relationship between the historical and geographical aspects of the Indian Ocean and the current geopolitical dynamics, establishing a vital framework for understanding maritime security in South Asia and its broader

global repercussions. It underscores the enduring historical significance of the Indian Ocean and the surrounding seas in influencing global events, while illuminating the competition for resources and power within this maritime domain, particularly among the South Asian coastal states. Furthermore, it contextualizes 'maritime' as an integral component of 'geopolitics' and 'geo-economics,' representing an extension of regional coastal interests. The paper also traces South Asia's evolution from colonial states within the Indian Ocean to non-aligned independent nations, advancing toward a confluence of globalization, regionalism, and power politics. Given the strategic importance of world oceans, a nuanced analysis of regional powers is imperative, as it provides critical insights into the 'why, how, and how much' concerning the value of this maritime space to these nations. Additionally, it sheds light on foreign perceptions regarding their own strategic intentions, assessing the degree to which their foreign policies align with maritime strategies as opposed to being limited by land-based considerations.

#### **Historical of the Indian Ocean Region**

Today, the Indian Ocean region has once again reemerged as a critically important theater of global strategic competition, with the ongoing rivalry particularly pronounced between the two major powers: China and the United States. Among all the various sub regions of the Indian Ocean, it is South Asia that bears the largest brunt and impact of this multifaceted competition. The reemergence of the Indian Ocean as a focal point relevant to contemporary strategic concerns is the direct outcome of the region's unique, albeit turbulent, historical landscape and its evolution over centuries (Krothwal & Kumar, 2023). The Indian Ocean, historically and culturally rich, has served as an essential cultural and commercial hub and stands as a crucible of diverse socio-religious influences that have shaped the lives of many peoples. Prosperous and dynamic economies have engaged in trade and exchange along the length and breadth of the sea since ancient times, fostering connections that transcend borders. This vibrant network of trade was intricately connected by the mono-culture of religion, with a shared faith and belief system that crossed geographic boundaries, and whose common language enabled its traders and pilgrims to navigate their journeys along an impressive arc that swept from the lush shores of Mozambique to the far-off islands nestled within the expansive waters of the South China Sea. The interconnections forged through centuries of

commerce and cultural exchange continue to resonate today, as this historical context informs the contemporary geopolitical landscape of the region (Sheriff, 2024).

At the same time, the Indian Ocean is a water body situated at the intersection of the world's three major continents. As such, these busy sea lanes have always supported much-contended strategic-geopolitical imperatives. From Alexander's corpse of a defeated empire to the Roman conquests, the Persian king Porus, the Arab conquest, the Turkish Ottomans, the Persian Safavids, or the Mughal explorers, the Indian subcontinent has been at the core of these evolutionary surges. However, the Islamization of socio-political structures only further reinforced these sea-based linkages. The opening of a new and safe sea route created a ripple effect in the India-West Asia-Western Europe corridor. Several states, Puranic kings in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent—along the India-West Asia corridor in present-day Balochistan/Rajapur are noted in Alexander's conquests. Three centuries after Alexander crossed at the Indus, commercial links already existed between the Kushana period in the northwest and the Mesopotamian-Stoic world. Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Gujarat, under the Shaivaite sultanate, opened up Saurashtra as a littoral port (Grare & Samaan, 2022).

The long history of these interactions has strongly molded the current maritime strategic behavior of the state actors in the Indian Ocean and ties them to a dyad of alliances and disputes. With the consolidation of the European state system from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the principal European states Britain, France, Portugal, and Holland constituted the geo-economics-commercial space of the Indian Ocean. They developed a number of assets crucial to maintaining Indian Ocean security: merchant shipping and cargo containers; the dominance of maritime insurance and financial services; key ports and free economic zones; regulation of inter- and intra-continental trade and economic policy; and anti-piracy, anti-arms, and human security-related laws and legal frameworks. Even as new states have climbed up the ladder of economic prosperity, maritime dominance has had its enduring influence on economic policy thinking. Established emerging powers such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, along with emerging countries such as Chile, Iran, and Venezuela, wanted reform in the existing securitization of international trade rules that were written by the P-5, whether decisions on world trade could be allocated from the

expense of the global commons or not. With a history of epochal leapfrog maritime events, South Asian state actors located on this bent axis of the arc have had to cope with the transformations in the old world trading system.

### **Geopolitical Significance of the Indian Ocean for South Asia**

The maritime space has developed its own dynamics, becoming increasingly vital and complex in statecraft. The Indian Ocean holds immense potential for South Asia because of its global geopolitical importance. The economic, strategic, and geopolitical dimensions of the Indian Ocean make the region a critical maritime corridor. The trade routes passing through the Indian Ocean play a vital role in Indian and Chinese commercial activities. For countries such as China and Japan, the security of sea lines of communication passing through the Indian Ocean is central to their energy supplies and the future of their consumptive industries. The possibility of having energy resources shipped from the Persian Gulf through the Indian Ocean has, to a great extent, featured in many of India's maritime strategy platforms. The Strait of Malacca possesses immense strategic importance because its blockage can affect global trade and create security dilemmas (Snedden, 2022).

Sea routes in the region are crucial as they directly connect to various ports on the Indian subcontinent. This access to vital maritime resources not only enables these countries to project themselves as formidable naval powers but also serves as a significant equalizer when it comes to maintaining essential maritime access. Various regional countries, including those in South Asia, possess their own global and regional geostrategic designs, although they may not have the requisite capabilities to meet their internal ambitions fully. These political ambitions often lead to aggressive attempts aimed at bolstering their influence in the region while simultaneously enhancing their overall geopolitical importance. At times, decisions surrounding national maritime policies are heavily influenced by the dynamics of interstate relations, such that they often seek to 'lock' smaller neighboring nations into their particular maritime sphere to secure their interests. It is a common assertion that national aspirations are vital for a country's security or for the effective projection of itself as a significant global power (Guo et al., 2022). The relationship between regional maritime stability and economic growth is intricately woven together. Without a stable maritime environment that allows for secure navigation and trade, it



becomes exceedingly difficult to pursue accelerated economic growth and development. A focus on securing and enhancing maritime access and stability is essential for regional countries to achieve their strategic ambitions as they navigate the complexities of both regional and international waters.

### **Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region**

Despite years of engagement with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, external powers and regional powers haven't completed a universally accepted understanding to ensure maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean region. The challenges to maritime security are diverse, ranging from traditional military security threats to non-traditional security issues such as smuggling, piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing, as well as coastal and port security in the region, and last but not least, environmental security (Lissillour and Bonet2021). At the same time, the militarization and presence of powerful naval forces from external and regional powers are increasing. Geopolitical competition among them in undersea battles and small littoral states' security dilemmas contribute to territorial waters in the region; in the near future, these are emerging and are in the interests of classic strategic considerations. Therefore, the increasing deterioration of climate change and the environment is also contributing to the scarcity of resources such as minerals, offshore petroleum reserves, and the domination of the area. As territorial maritime security and strategy in the region become increasingly unavoidable, it is essential to dig deep into the practical implications of these challenges for the countries in that region (Petersen & Pincus, 2021). By understanding these practical impacts, we can comprehend the geopolitics and cooperation of the region. The United Nations has identified the diverse dimensions of Maritime Authority Security. A great deal of traditional and non-traditional threats to maritime security exists in the vast maritime spaces and areas of the world, including many developing countries in the region. Some sub-national terror networks, tribal groups, and sect-based organizations employing small speedboats pose a threat to the peaceful countries of the Straits of Malacca, the East Coast of Somalia, the Arabian Sea, and the South and East Asia region. Hurricanes, storms, the release of large volumes of icebergs, and earthquakes are some examples of natural disasters. The destruction of nature, the dumping of waste by ships, and ecological degradation are among the products and byproducts of sea-based economic activities. Enigmatic submarine volcanic

eruptions churn chemicals, gases, and minerals that directly and indirectly affect water, the ecosystem, and marine life in the Indian Ocean.

While piracy has reduced due to international interventions, the number of acts is increasing in the Bay of Bengal and other areas. This contributes to navalization, arms defense proliferation, and so on in the region. Coral destruction, harmful algal blooms, higher mean sea levels, depletion of mangrove species, drought, and floods are increasing disasters in the Indian Ocean region. Total waters facilitate coordination with member states regarding the Blue Economy and disaster management in the Gulf of Aden and Mozambique Channel as mechanisms serving the areas. The presence of pirate camps in coastal, remote, or originating ports that are not feasible to prosecute makes it virtually impossible to ensure a distinct role for coastal nations in preventing designated titular commanders from carrying out their activities (Garba, 2022). Finally, the depletion of national economic resources and the massive international aid by officials and others who became aware of their complicity in piracy are revealing. Disgraced officials may consider the risk of being severely sued, but in an environment where the local population has little or no faith in the judicial system, it is suggested that there are considerable prospects of suborning someone to form a favorable opinion or to dismiss the case entirely. All of these abnormal conditions are difficult for the coast guard to control and provide very little help in blocking piracy.

### **Naval Strategies of South Asian Countries**

In response to these emerging security challenges, a diverse range of naval strategies has evolved and developed across South Asian countries that operate along the Indian Ocean littoral zone. These various strategies are primarily characterized by the unique naval doctrines of each South Asian country and their specific operational priorities and goals. This section will specifically focus on the significant naval modernization efforts undertaken by India, as well as the ongoing competition between different South Asian states in their investment in naval capabilities and resources (Snedden, 2022). In recent years, many South Asian countries have manifested a heightened interest in strengthening and expanding their naval capacities. India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka stand out as the major South Asian states fervently pursuing a comprehensive naval strategy within the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, major global powers have sought to establish either

bilateral or multilateral agreements with these states in order to facilitate operational provisions and enhance regional security cooperation (Faran & Ejaz, 2022).

There exists a notable divergence among the naval doctrines formulated by the various countries in South Asia. The naval doctrines established by India and Sri Lanka are fundamentally grounded in the objective of defending their respective national strategic interests. On the other hand, the naval doctrines articulated by Pakistan and the Maldives reflect a revival of a former naval prowess and their aspiration to reclaim regional power status. In this context, India stands out as the most formidable naval power in the Indian Ocean, having invested substantial capital and resources into enhancing and modernizing its naval capabilities over the years (Khalid, 2021). In addition to this, both Pakistan and India have also made considerable investments aimed at the enhancement and development of missile technology, further illustrating their military ambitions. While each country keeps in mind their own regional security concerns and geostrategic imperatives, South Asian nations prioritize three broad categories when it comes to defending their naval missions: deterrence, power projection, and the crucial task of securing vital Sea Lanes of Communication that are essential for trade and military logistics. The maritime security strategies adopted by South Asian states are not only shaped by their internal considerations and security dynamics but are also significantly influenced by external pressures and the intricate patterns of mutual interaction among the states in the region.

### **Major Powers and their Interests in the Indian Ocean**

The Indian Ocean has become a significant arena of competition for major powers. In pursuit of their respective geopolitical strategies, India and China, in particular, but also the US, Russia, and the Western and Asian member states of NATO, maintain their naval presence and port-calling activities in the Indian Ocean. It is important to understand why these major powers consider their presence in the Indian Ocean to be of so much significance (Long et al.2023). The interests of these global players in the Indian Ocean are prompted by both security and economic concerns. In security terms, the global powers are motivated to maintain and enhance their strategic interests across the Indian Ocean. They intend to secure maritime chokepoints and sea lines of communication across the region as part of their geopolitical strategies. Eight of the top ten busiest sea lines of communication



in the world traverse the Indian Ocean, and energy supplies for the Indian, Chinese, and broader Southeast Asian markets are dependent on these routes. In economic terms, the security of these energy routes is important for major powers' well-being, and so they are inclined to exert influence on the Indian Ocean to ensure the security of energy supplies to their energy-hungry economies. The Indian Ocean provides access to these external markets for resource-hungry regional players, and in so doing, deepens these states' interests across the waters beyond the traditional chokepoints that buffer them from the Indian Ocean (Sheriff, 2024).

In light of their significant maritime presence across the Indian Ocean, several strategic considerations need to be examined. One of the prime strategic interests of major powers is the maintenance of regional stability. This is particularly important for South Asian countries, which are affected by the global and regional competition. South Asian countries are concerned about the long-term intentions of powers like the US and China in basing their naval power on the peripheries of the Indian Ocean, especially in the Arabian Sea. Another strategic consideration involves the freedom of navigation across the peripheries and parts of the Indian Ocean. The major powers are concerned about the security of the Indian Ocean's sea lines of communication in very real strategic terms. The interconnection between security and trade in the Indian Ocean is central for major powers. It is believed that security measures through military alliances and partnerships will enhance the major powers' influence in the Indian Ocean. For instance, India, in coupling trade with regional security, is engaging the US in order to enhance its regional influence with the backing of a superpower (Aswani et al.2021).

Reinforcing the first two assumptions is the large amount of trade that transits across the Indian Ocean. The balance of trade explores the third assumption that maritime trade beneficiaries like the US, Japan, and China are strategically interested in the stability of the Indian Ocean's economic resources, and a proliferation of security measures is seen to serve their economic interests in the Indian Ocean. These three assumptions recognize the global industry of the Indian Ocean and the further stakes that major powers have in its economic well-being. The increased rivalry among the major powers in the Indian Ocean, based on their strategic security considerations, will also affect the dynamics of the region.

### **Role of International Organizations in Maritime Security**

Different international organizations can indeed play a critical role in enhancing maritime security, especially when it comes to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts within war zones that are situated along the Indian Ocean. These international organizations typically work to facilitate dialogue by bringing together the states that engage directly or indirectly in the active maritime conflict across various contexts. This collaborative approach allows them to address vital aspects of maritime security in conjunction with other concerned states that share an interest in maintaining stability in maritime affairs (Karim, 2022). The United Nations, for instance, operates through several other agencies dedicated to fostering a peaceful and just resolution of maritime conflicts that may arise between parties both within and between the states of the Indian Ocean region. While its primary function is as a legal instrument meant to lay out a framework for the exploitation and conservation of the seas, it also contains provisions that are designed specifically to assist in promoting international and regional cooperation aimed at bolstering maritime security in different scenarios. In the region of the Indian Ocean, a variety of regional bodies have been established, which enable smaller groups of states with vested interests in maritime issues to convene and discuss their priorities regularly. These regional entities are largely formed within the Indian Ocean context, serving to address a range of topics that encompass not only general security but also law enforcement challenges and environmental concerns. Over recent years, multiple regional organizations, which have somewhat broader political mandates, have started to engage actively in building capacities related to maritime security. They have established mechanisms for ongoing dialogue that occur on a more or less continuous basis, which is vital in the context of an ever-evolving maritime landscape (Khan & Emon, 2024). It is important to note that maritime cooperation often constitutes only a minor segment of the overall policy frameworks of international and regional organizations. This aspect is frequently appended to agreements that primarily focus on other sectors and issues. As such, there are currently no dedicated international or regional organizations that focus exclusively on maritime security as their core mission. In line with this observation, conflict resolution has often been intentionally incorporated into the official mandates of these organizations. This is particularly notable in the case of agencies affiliated with the

UN, where their public statements frequently underscore the necessity for peaceful resolution of disputes alongside the advancement of maritime development, highlighting their commitment to fostering peaceful solutions. Despite these intentions, however, the actual effectiveness of these organizations in achieving tangible security outcomes, or in providing effective security measures for specific states, often falls short of the promised ideals (Bueger & Edmunds, 2021). This gap can be significantly attributed to the complexities involved, including the varying levels of support provided for particular states, which can hinder the overall efficacy of the maritime security initiatives being pursued.

### **Technological Developments in Maritime Security**

As a result, a big push has been given to augment the surveillance capabilities, surface, sub-surface, and air – of the navies and coast guards. They have been provided with new patrol ships and aircraft with longer range and better endurance. The countries are looking towards importing and indigenously developing a range of maritime reconnaissance planes, multi-purpose helicopters, radars, and drones to complement this effort. Significantly, there has also been a shift from traditional weapons systems to sensors. The Indian Navy is acquiring weapons, such as anti-ship cruise missiles, primarily to enable the deployment of an active surveillance posture (Stöhs, 2021). The importance of international cooperation and gathering of intelligence has also been recognized, and therefore mechanisms of information-sharing have been developed and strengthened under the rubric of full-spectrum cooperation – at the national, regional, and extra-regional levels. Moreover, software programs that use artificial intelligence and algorithms are now being developed to sift through the big data that these sensors will generate in order to provide alerts to decision-makers and the stations where responses can be made operational.

In looking at the future of maritime security, the national security elite is showing increased interest in what is known as unmanned systems and cyber. These technologies are highly adaptable and could find many roles in military and maritime security functions, such as being put into mast-mounted devices inside warships for surveillance and reconnaissance of air and surface threats. To this extent, talk of a ‘new age of sea power’ is not at all unfounded, and in many respects, already seems to have arrived. State-of-the-art technology is rapidly becoming the keyword for concretizing

responses to the naval modernization plans. Moreover, the great disparity in the maritime technologies that the different nations of South Asia have, many of them occurring under the rubric of strategic partnerships with major extra-regional powers, could have profound implications on the fabric of the future maritime security architecture. The Indian Navy's under-sea listening arrays in the seas around the peninsula would enable it to see anything on the sea bed, as such arrays generate acoustic thermographs that effectively create an X-ray view of the contents down below. It would work at several hundred kilometers out on either side of the Indian Ocean region and therefore help India project power.

### **Economic Dimensions of Maritime Security**

A multitude of economic dimensions are believed to define the discourse of maritime security in the Indian Ocean, and they converge upon two critical points that warrant further investigation. On the one hand, the remarkable rise of Asia's 'tiger economies' over recent decades has significantly propelled not only merchant shipping but also the overall flow of energy and trade within the West Indian Ocean, bringing it to unprecedented situations that have transformed the regional landscape. Hindu expansion contributed effectively to enabling a multitude of opportunities for an area that fundamentally relies on the exceedingly high volume of valuable route settlements alongside exclusive energy resources (Fouseki, 2023). On the flip side, however, sovereign states are highly motivated by their ever-growing desire to ensure that the vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and essential ports of call required to conduct business activities are not targeted for these destabilizing purposes. Maritime trade and naval exploitation emerge as critical determinants and influential factors for the region's strategic decision-making paradigms, influencing national security policies and international relations. South Asia's Maritime Economies South Asian countries undeniably have strong stakes in the multifaceted economic dimensions of maritime security, given the already impressively high volume of legitimate shipping activity occurring in the region and the explicit desire among states to make greater use of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) (Bueger et al.2022).

Moreover, accessing the abundant energy resources found within other regional states is a focal point of interest. Denying others access to dwindling valuable coastal lines and coveted resources is one compelling reason why states may feel compelled to engage in

piracy or impose economic sanctions as tactics to safeguard their interests. Should threatened shipping transit and trading activity in the Indian Ocean experience a significant decrease, it could result in dismaying and severe effects for the entire region, severely impacting economic stability. Between 66% and 90% of global trade tonnage is carried by sea; the oil trade is even more pronounced and disproportionate, with a staggering 98% of all traded oil moving by ship at the turn of the 21st century. In other words, maintaining safe and secure shipping routes is both a regional and global trade necessity and serves as valuable economic goods for all nations involved (Verschuur et al., 2022). For this reason, there is a powerful and compelling interest shared by all stakeholders to ensure that littoral bordering capacity, along with the proxies of the global community, possess sufficient capacity to materially make necessary changes to facilitate safe and unimpeded trade across these crucial maritime pathways.

#### **Legal Frameworks and Maritime Disputes in the Indian Ocean**

The jurisdiction of a coastal state extends across a series of zones from the internal waters to the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the high seas to the area that lies within the continental shelf. The contiguous relationships between the Indian states make them enduring stakeholders in the seas as means of sustenance, security, and politics. Maritime disputes are a complex web of territorial sovereignty and maritime boundary issues. Such disputes are further embedded in a network of claims of rights to exploit the biological and mineral resources of the Indian Ocean and the flexibility of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to respond to the same, given the minimum standards of governance contained in a regime treaty (Trouillet & Jay, 2021).

Maritime disputes in the southern part of the Indian Ocean cut across regional waters, sharing an interface with the global bottleneck of the Malacca Straits. Each of the South Asian states has its own interpretation of the extent of the EEZ and the maritime boundary beyond it. India and some of its neighbors have resorted to international adjudication to resolve some of these disputes. In the coming years, it is expected that the Indian Ocean littorals will move their jurisdiction into the high seas into areas of the same kind by creating an international regime for such areas. Attempts have been made to negotiate and resolve issues peacefully with India's neighbors (Grare & Samaan, 2022). The role of diplomacy and the nature of the state are crucial to



understanding the root causes of these disputes and the reasons why they remain unresolved.

Whether regional or global, laws can be affected by power imbalances between countries and the conflicts of interest that exist among rival states. Countries have to live within a complex and dense web of laws. The multi-faceted nature of states contributes to their being responder powers in some legal regimes and being targeted powers in others. The same law or convention can offer both opportunities and limitations. A compelling account of why laws or conventions are generally respected is the consistency between laws and observance in their consonance with national interest. In the case of the Law of the Sea, the increased maritime disputes, developments in technology, world politics, the accretive value of fish and mineral resources, and the unresolved questions of institutional arrangements and policymaking contributed to the need for a legal framework (Ramos et al.2021). The various legal regimes in the maritime field and operations, including combating piracy, terrorism, human smuggling, and armed robbery, played a crucial role. The law was seen as a way to resolve existing disputes, a means to clarify norms, to protect the weak, and to provide mechanisms to enable and sustain cooperation in the seas.

### **Future Trends and Scenarios in Indian Ocean Geopolitics**

In an environment as dynamic and uncertain as international relations, the question is less about predicting change per se, but rather about how perceived minor adjustments in current trajectories could gather momentum and generate significant shifts. If the Indian Ocean is such a dynamic system, we need better tools to understand these dynamics, including shifts, periods of continuity, and reversals. Too often we tend to view the future as a continuous consequence of the present, notwithstanding clear punctuations in history. What 'determines' future changes could itself be a dramatic destabilization of existing power distributions and patterns of global governance. Thus, an open, adaptable policy stance that can embrace, guide, or even shape – yet still live with – greater uncertainty will be the 'safe' harbor within which the stability of maritime coproduction will best be preserved. The manageable trends we outline are only a small number of trajectories to be explored. These illustrative five headings encapsulate a potential gamut, not an exhaustive reflection of what could happen in the region.

Where are likely to evolve power distributions? We assume that staying power will be the single most important factor involved in

determining how far future 'balance of power' perceptions might change, given the key role in the security of the Indian Ocean as well as our conviction that an uncontested Navy will remain, unless it itself determines otherwise, the sole transoceanic arbitration force. Similarly, a system led by one power will involve greater uncertainty, with another retaining some pivotal leverage. This scenario roughly assumes the regionalization of maritime power projects, with navies focusing policies toward situations and venues within their immediate, less globalized vicinity while both sustaining global maritime interests. Action in the Indian Ocean is similarly plausible, particularly if certain programs expand in the region. Despite this latter trend, we cautiously warn against pessimism regarding institutional frameworks emerging to manage the maritime non-proliferation challenge. Organizations can enlarge via penetration rather than invitation.

### **Conclusion**

As we have discussed in previous sections, the maritime environment in the Western Indian Ocean presents a particularly intricate and multifaceted landscape. Within this setting, there exists a diverse array of national, regional, and international organizations that play both immediate and mediate roles in addressing the central findings and concerns highlighted in this study. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the historical, geopolitical, and technological contexts that shape this region is essential to comprehending how regional security is being constructed and understood within the complex dynamics of the Indian Ocean. Historical influences, alongside current maritime factors, create an exceedingly intricate web of strategic considerations across the region. Each country within this maritime space has developed a set of collective security agreements, reflecting their commitment to collaboration. However, it becomes a dangerous and troubling indication of insecurity when these nations only respond reactively to perceived threats instead of recognizing and accepting the necessity of a more proactive and collaborative approach to security. This study has clearly demonstrated that there remains substantial potential for regional states to engage and collaborate effectively on matters related to maritime security. By establishing this collaborative engagement as a primary policy goal, we could significantly enhance the security posture of the region and simultaneously mitigate various threats faced by the states within it. Therefore, five distinct recommendations can be put forth for five different

actors involved in this process. Specifically, the next steps for an informed and resourceful research agenda should include: conducting a thorough review of the numerous energy security pipelines and their ongoing construction efforts throughout the region; evaluating the current, particularly the recent historical context of interstate relations occurring west of the Indian subcontinent; and closely examining the activities of various countries engaged in the region. This should include an analysis of how the intelligence and security agencies of these states may have adapted their strategies and approaches towards the rest of the region, especially in the aftermath of significant geopolitical events that have left lasting impacts on regional stability.

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