

Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region: An Evolving Strategic Triangle between the U.S., India and China

Dr. Sharifah Munirah Syed Hussein Alatas

Abstract—This article focuses on the Indian Ocean regional order, particularly on the United States-India-China strategic triangle in the 21st century. It addresses various initiatives of all three nations, including the concept of a maritime strategic triangle and the formation of a possible tri-polar regional order in the IOR, the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, the One Belt One Road Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area, and the Pivot to the Indo-Pacific policy which have implications for maritime strategy and security in the region. The article hypothesizes that there has been a transition from a unipolar to a tri-polar system manifest by a triangular matrix, with a U.S.-India maritime partnership facing a rising China in the region, and that all three powers prefer an accommodative strategy with respect to one another.

Keywords—Indian Ocean Region, tripolarism, maritime security, accommodative strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

SYSTEMIC configurations in different regions of the globe lend themselves to debates in the discipline of strategic studies and international relations. These concern, among others, the costs and benefits of various “polaric” orders. This means, a discussion on tripolarity in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is vital to understanding the current power entanglements that characterize this strategic body of water. The IOR comprises nation-states that border the Indian Ocean, and states that take an interest in the ocean itself. The latter are associated with the tributary water to the Indian Ocean as well as those land-locked states for which transit to and from the sea is oriented towards the Indian Ocean. We also include the 19 states that belong to the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). In total, there are 51 states, 28 of which are Indian Ocean rim states, plus a further 10 that are coastal states of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, together with an additional 13 Indian Ocean land-locked states. The table below lists out these countries:

Indian Ocean rim states	Other coastal states of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf	Indian Ocean land-locked states
Australia Mozambique	Bahrain	Afghanistan
Bangladesh Oman	Egypt	Bhutan
Myanmar Pakistan	Iraq	Botswana
Comoros Seychelles	Israel	Burundi
Djibouti Singapore	Eritrea	Ethiopia
France★ Somalia	Jordan	Lesotho
Kenya South Africa	Kuwait	Malawi
India Sri Lanka	Qatar	Nepal
Indonesia Tanzania	Saudi Arabia	Rwanda
Iran Thailand	Sudan	Swaziland
Madagascar Timor Leste		Uganda
Malaysia United Arab Emirates		Zambia
Maldives United Kingdom★		
Mauritius Yemen		

Fig. 1: The 51 states of the Indian Ocean region (★ For France and the United Kingdom, because of their island territories)

The importance of the IOR is discussed here from a maritime security perspective. The Indian Ocean is the third largest body of water in the world. It contains vital sea lanes that feed Asia’s largest economies, namely China and India. China and India, both eager to secure their position as major powerbrokers in global affairs, have increased their geopolitical and military presence in the IOR. The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are considered among the most strategically important in the world—according to the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, more than 80 percent of the world’s seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 percent passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent through the Strait of Malacca and 8 percent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait.

Dr. Sharifah Munirah Syed Hussein Alatas, is with Strategic Studies and International Relations Program, Center for History, Politics and Strategy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, UKM BANGI, Selangor, MALAYSIA.

Hence, the transit of oil resources from the Persian Gulf to East Asia, the large proportion of fragile and failing states along the ocean's littoral (from Somalia to Burma), competition over seabed resources, climate change impacts on island and low-lying littoral regions, North-South conflicts over India's claims to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 1.37 million square miles, piracy, terrorism, and the danger of "sea denial", proliferation of nuclear weapons, rivalry between India and China and trafficking in persons and drugs have resulted in the IOR being of such strategic importance to the international community.

More than half the world's armed conflicts are presently located in the Indian Ocean region, while the waters are also home to continually evolving strategic developments including the competing rise of China and India, potential nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, terrorism, growing incidence of piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, and management of diminishing fishery resources. The Greater Indian Ocean Region stretching eastward from the Horn of Africa past the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian plateau and the Indian subcontinent, all the way to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, could be the center of global conflicts, because most international business supply will be conducted through this route (Kaplan, 2010). There are two critical strategic issues that cut across the IOR and that have a global impact. These are the changing Chinese approaches towards the IOR, marking a new trend in maritime security interests and the overall security of maritime traffic and commerce through the entire region, which include the strategic roles of the US, China and India air and sea forces in the IOR.

As a result of all this, almost all the world's major powers have deployed substantial military forces in the Indian Ocean region. For example, in addition to maintaining expeditionary forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US 5th Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, and uses the island of Diego Garcia as a major air-naval base and logistics hub for its Indian Ocean operations. In addition, the United States has deployed several major naval task forces there, including Combined Task Force 152, which is aimed at safeguarding the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf, and Combined Task Force 150, which is tasked with countering piracy from the Gulf of Oman to Kenya. France, meanwhile, is perhaps the last of the major European powers to maintain a significant presence in the north and southwest Indian Ocean quadrants, with naval bases in Djibouti, Reunion, and Abu Dhabi. And, of course, China and India both also have genuine aspirations of developing blue water naval capabilities through the development and acquisition of aircraft carriers and an aggressive modernization and expansion programme.

It is no mystery why most nation-states are interested in the stability of the IOR. This is because of its importance as a transitional focal point for commercial shipping traffic traversing the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The United States of America, for instance, wants to ensure open access to the IOR. They operate with an integrated approach to the region across military and civilian organizations. The reason for this

approach to the strategic importance of the IOR is due to the growth of a range of non-traditional threats as well as the growing economic and military importance of China and India. The latter two countries challenge US hegemony in the region. A footnote to the discussion above revolves around the current debate about the 'decline' in US interests and capabilities in the IOR. To the contrary, the US has three important reasons to strategize in the IOR. Firstly, the Indian Ocean is a region that is important to maintain as a secure highway for international commerce. Secondly, there are strategic choke points along the Indian Ocean highway, in the Straits of Hormuz on one end and the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea on the other. For energy security reasons, the US sees it their vital task to secure smooth access through these choke points in order to assure a regular supply of much-needed resources such as petroleum and natural gas. Safe passage of manufactured goods between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans is also on the US agenda. Thirdly, the Indian Ocean is likely to remain the main arena of Sino-Indian competition in the long run or at least in the near future. With this in mind, we discuss the details of big power geopolitics in the IOR, and for the purpose of this article, we will focus on maritime defense and strategy (security) in the region.

II. STRATEGIC TRIANGLE AND TRI-POLARITY IN THE IOR

The concept of a power triangle between three countries has its origins in sociology and social psychology. The concept identified three great powers where each attempts to outwit the other for its own gains. Among the three major players, there is one pivot state which is the most powerful player. Henry Kissinger wrote that the most advantageous position in the strategic triangle is the pivot role, which maintains amity with the two other players, while pitting them against each other.

The concept of a triangular polar system in the IOR is derived from the realist framework which emphasizes the characteristic of a strategic triangle concept. The image of a triangle geopolitical arrangement in the IOR points to strategic patterns of both cooperation and competition among the US, China and India. In other words, power relations among the three nations focus both on each nation containing the other, as well as the possibilities of cooperation in the spheres of economic, civil society and scientific collaboration. An important ingredient which allows for the existence of a triangular geopolitical arrangement in the IOR is the need for the US to secure access to the burgeoning markets of India and China. This need for new markets is emphasized in US president Obama's Pivot to the Asia-Pacific policy which was announced in 2011. The pivot policy is the US's latest foreign policy initiative to re-balance her diplomatic, economic, people-to-people and security interests with the Indo-Pacific region. Indian and Chinese foreign policy maneuvers in the IOR have resulted in new engagements of each nation with other players in the region. The establishment of the Yalong naval base near Sanya, Sri Lanka by China is a case in point. In the case of India, bilateral and trilateral relations have been established with the Mauritius, the Seychelles,

Madagascar, Mozambique, Kenya and Tanzania. Specifically, India's Essar group has already established stakes in three oil and gas exploration blocks in Madagascar (Vines and Oruitemeka, 2008). More of this will be elaborated upon in the next section.

The basis of a tri-polar IOR is premised on a much higher degree of economic globalization and economic interdependence and the possession of nuclear weapons by the great powers. The current geospatial supremacy in the IOR points to a tripolar arrangement, meaning that tri-polarity is characterized by the three main powers (US, India and China) building new engagements (some scholars refer to this as 'alliances') for the purpose of containing the power and influence of one another. It can also be conceived of as cooperation among the three nations. For instance, US-India relations have focused on the common threat of terrorism, as well as other global security issues, defense cooperation and public diplomacy. Sino-US relations have been cooperative as well, as can be seen in issues like non-proliferation in the Korean peninsula, counter terrorism measures and economic engagements. Sino-Indian relations focus mainly on economics and trade, science and technology, computer technology, pharmaceuticals, peaceful application of nuclear energy and hydro-electricity generation (Hettiarachchi and Abeyrathne, 2015). More details on the containment and cooperation strategies of the three nations will be discussed in the concluding segment.

III. BIG POWER INTERESTS IN THE IOR

Addressing the role played by the three big powers in the IOR is necessary for both theoretical and policy reasons. Theoretically, it offers a look at the strategy of their blue-water navies, which are maritime forces capable of operating in the deep waters of the oceans. Each power wants to project influence through operations across the open oceans, and in the process, projects "credible power" in the distant seas. Policy-wise, a state's foreign policy choices are a function of domestic and structural factors. Domestic factors or *innenpolitik* ("bringing the state back in") that influence a state's role internationally include a country's economic development level or regime type. Structural factors can be defined as the distribution of capabilities and common commitments across the big powers, which would induce systemic-level pressures and opportunities affecting other players in the region (Kuik, 2012). Systems are composed of agents and a set of relationships between them. These agents are humans or organized groups of humans, like governments, individuals or non-state organizations such as MNCs, interest groups, NGOs and IGOs. Therefore, the interests of the US, India and China in the IOR revolve around the security their maritime forces can provide, soft power capabilities and domestic factors.

A. U.S. Interests

The US sees the IOR as a transit route for goods and energy. In the last 10 years, US strategic planning has increasingly included military presence in the IOR as can be

seen in the publication of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, the National Security Strategy and the Unified Command Plan. As far as domestic factors are concerned, the US's role in the IOR is determined by domestic needs for raw materials such as oil and gas, both required to fuel the domestic economy. To meet these needs, the US has to maintain the IOR as a secure highway for international commerce between the oil-rich Gulf States and the economically-dynamic East Asia (Green and Shearer, 2012). Structural factors fueling US interests in the IOR concern the need to maintain freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. States such as Iran and Beijing have the means to control the flow of commerce through these chokepoints as was witnessed in 2011 when Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation to the US sanctions imposed over its nuclear program. Beijing pushed China's claims to control the "cow's tongue" of islets and rocks in the South China Sea that lie in the direct path of sea lanes to Japan and South Korea, two of the US's allies in East Asia.

B. Indian Interests

Since the end of the Cold War, India has gradually emerged on the global scene to become a leading power, compared to her previous role as a balancing state which was essentially defensive. Her foreign policy under Narendra Modi is driven by domestic economic reforms, as well as Modi's vision of a multipolar world. He envisages India becoming a traditional great power in that world, one among a few. Modi also seeks to transform India's role in the IOR into a strategically significant player in global politics, the primary objective being to ensure a secure and stable IOR, free of terrorism (recall the 2008 Mumbai terror attack) and other non-traditional threats to security. Therefore, India realizes the need for an increased naval/maritime presence in the IOR, including the Indian Ocean Littoral Region (Seychelles and Mauritius). Recognizing China's containment initiative embodied in the String of Pearls policy, India is determined to become a security provider for the island states in the IOR. This has prompted New Delhi to reinvest in building naval capabilities for extended presence and power projective around the Indian peninsula (Tellis, 2016). Also, Modi has gifted the Seychelles with a second Dornier aircraft for maritime monitoring, signed an agreement for conducting hydrographic surveys, and launched a coastal surveillance radar project. The latter is part of an ambitious project to build a maritime domain awareness network across the Indian Ocean. It calls for 8 surveillance radars in Mauritius, 8 in Seychelles, 6 in Sri Lanka and 10 in Maldives (Mohan, 2015). In Mauritius Modi attended the commissioning of the Indian-made offshore patrol vessel Barracuda, marking his commitment to maritime capacity building in small island republics.

There are few Indian leaders who, like Modi, have the capacity to promote a vision of leadership in the IOR. Also, it is timely that the US welcomes India's "rise", as well as initiatives to strengthen an India-US strategic partnership.

This is clear from the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, agreed to with Obama. Its purpose is to allow for deeper economic integration with the US which will translate into a solid geopolitical bond between the two states. Also, Modi is aware of the need for a structural transformation domestically if India is to become a great power. Some of the domestic fault-lines are as follows:

- i. India's reluctance to accept foreign capital
- ii. India's fear of foreign domination
- iii. The banking sector is in a deep crisis due to bad loans
- iv. India has a large population but scarce employment opportunities
- v. The workforce is poorly-educated
- vi. There is a lack of access to public health care

Overall, though, it is India's maritime interests that have taken shape very recently with the publication of the Indian Navy's *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (2015). One of the declarations in the Indian Navy's Vision Statement (2014) is that "*the Navy will effectively engage friendly maritime forces of the Indian Ocean Region and beyond, through port visits, bilateral interactions, training initiatives, operational exercises and technical support arrangements, in order to.....enhance security and stability in the region*". The 2015 document/doctrine is bold in its endeavors, and one which, for the first time, is close to declaring a grand strategy. There is a strategy for deterrence, conflict, coastal and offshore security, maritime force and capability development and ensuring secure seas stretching from the African horn to the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea.

C. Chinese Interests

In 2014, China released its latest defense white paper. This document represents a fundamental shift in the theme of all previous white papers. In the past, the Chinese projected the notion of peace and development, downplaying the prospects of conflict among the major powers. However, there remain, till today, factors of instability in the IOR including unresolved borders with India, tension with neighbors in the East and South China Seas and a concern about separatists with regard to Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. The 2014 white paper raises concerns about the Korean peninsula, Japan and the US, and that it is up to China to maintain *security* and stability. China's solution? Active defense. Rooted in the writings of Mao Zedong, this concept stressed that preparations for military struggle were necessary and that advances in the technology of war and broader economic changes were the key to winning wars. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), through the white paper, focuses on its military strategic missions because Chinese leadership sees itself under threat from multiple directions. In 2014 (ironically the same time of the release of the Defense White Paper), two Chinese attack submarines were seen docked China's built-and-owned container terminal in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Recently, in 2015, a Chinese Yuan-class submarine

paid a visit to the Pakistani port city of Karachi. This is in tandem with the focus of the latest white paper which emphasizes greater deference to the seas and a shift from "offshore waters defense" to "open seas protection". The language is strong, suggesting that Chinese grand strategy now includes the IOR. China is also investing heavily in submarines and warships, and manufacturing a second aircraft carrier (Chellaney, 2015).

The current Chinese foreign policy is about expanding and securing maritime routes to the Middle East, Africa and Europe, through the Indian Ocean. This is evident in Xi Jinping's dual Silk Road initiatives, the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategic push. OBOR includes his Maritime Silk Road initiative as well as the overland *Silk* Road to connect China with Central Asia, the Caspian Sea basin and Europe. China's presence in the IOR is significant, what with the Chinese-built Pakistani port of Gwadar. This makes Pakistan the link between the maritime and overland Silk roads. China thinks of India as a long term challenge and to counter India's rise, she will continue to use Pakistan as an important instrument to limit India's power. As far as the US goes, Obama visited New Delhi in 2015 to offer support in India's development of an aircraft carrier. The two nations agreed that the US should share and design aircraft carrier technology (Tellis, 2015). The US is increasingly becoming disappointed with China, especially the latter's failure to reform (liberalize) her domestic political system (Harding, 2015). Coupled with China's increasing military presence in the IOR, the US is disillusioned with China's speedy development of a blue water navy which includes aircraft carriers, advanced surface ships and submarines, tactical and strategic missiles and a variety of asymmetrical weapons systems intended to negate US technological advantages. Examples of these are anti-satellite weapons, multiple-re-entry warhead and cyber warfare techniques which can engage in espionage and disrupt infrastructure (Harding, 2015).

IV. CONCLUSION: THE US-INDIA-CHINA TROIKA AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN ACCOMMODATIVE MARITIME STRATEGY

The US and India should continue to deepen their IOR strategic partnership, especially in the realm of maritime security. This could certainly have a positive effect on China's perception of the two powers in the IOR, forcing her to put a check on her bold military presence in the region. A friendly US-India relationship could compel China's maritime strategy along a moderate path. This means the US and India should continue to engage China with an accommodative strategy. The US and India should also continue to discuss and map China's maritime pursuits in the IOR with each other. This is a signal to Beijing that a strong partnership between two big powers can act as a balance to China's maritime growth potential. The US and Indian private sectors can continue to do business in China. This prompts a track-II diplomatic strategy to engage China economically, which in turn sends a message that China is

not excluded. An official US-India-China trilateral dialogue should be considered to provide a platform to discuss specific matters affecting all three countries. These include maritime security issues in the IOR, military modernization and commercial interests among the three nations. In the realm of maritime strategy, the US should continue to mastermind the concept of protecting shared spaces or the maritime commons in the IOR. Both the US and India should include China in this effort, in order to assure her that she is not being strategically “balanced”, but treated as an equally-regarded leading power (Singh, 2015).

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