

## INDIA OCEAN REGION AND ITS GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

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### ABSTRACT

The main aim of the present study is to evaluate the tactical significance of Indian Ocean Region for India. To fulfil this motive, a researcher has taken global powerful nations and their control in Indian Ocean region- topography. The Indian Ocean has come out as an analytical trench for business, trading, power and energy perspectives. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has set off as a territory for industrial advancement, discourse, quarrel, and rivalry for territorial control by global powerful nations like china, the United States, India, Australia, Japan, and United Kingdom between different marine zones like the strait of Hormuz, Red sea, Arabian Sea, Central Indian ocean, Bay of Bengal, Andaman sea and the Malacca strait. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union wanted direct access to the IOR; now, China and USA are looking for the same. To explore the Indian Ocean region, one need to go back in time before independence in the cold war era which usually started around 1945-46.

**Keywords-** Ocean, Geo-strategies, Countries, Straits

### GEO-STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF INDIAN OCEAN REGION

The India Ocean is the third largest ocean and covers 19.8% of water surface. This region contains around 35% of world population, 25% world landmass and around 42% of world's oil and gas reserves. In North it touches Asian continent from Suez Canal to Malay, in west it touches Africa, in east it includes Indonesian islands, Singapore, Australia and Tasmania and in south it extends to Antarctica. The Indian ocean region has 51 offshore and landlocked states, namely 4 Persian Gulf nations, Saudi Arabia, France, Britain, 5 red sea nations, 26 Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) countries and 13 landlocked nations.

Indian Ocean Region remains a fulcrum, being the world's busiest commerce route (Tellis, 1985). Indian Ocean is rich in natural resources, Aquaculture and contains mineral resources like nickel, iron, cobalt, sulphide deposits of manganese, iron, silver and gold in huge amount in its deep waters. Indian Ocean coastal sediments are also important sources of titanium, zirconium, tin, zinc and copper. India is effectively "the only viable link" between various naval zones of Indian Ocean region, namely strait of Malacca, Bay of Bengal, the Malacca Straits, Central Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Bab el Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz (Singh, 2003). The choke points have great strategic importance, as around 80% of world's maritime oil trade and commerce

passes through this region but they are exposed to drug trafficking, global conflicts, religious disputes, and Terrorism. To ward off such threats and to gain/maintain a strong foothold in this resource rich region, all major Powerful nations are trying hard to increase their strategic significance.

The growth of China beyond the naval zone has constrained countries (including India) to revamp their marine policies. It aims at gazing at the geostrategic Significance of the Indian Ocean region for India, China's growing influence in the ocean, and tactics to counterbalance China. The US being the major power in the Indian Ocean since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The US has used its power to make it secure all trading paths and energy supplies have not been affected. It also used the IOR to start military intrusions, along with Kuwait, Somalia and Iraq. The Indian Ocean Rim Association came into existence as an intergovernmental organisation after the fall of racial Discrimination in south Africa.

The increasing influence of China in Indian ocean is great concern for India, as China is enhancing its presence through belt and road initiative (BRI) in Indian ocean, Africa and other strategic island nations. The Chinese navy and its vessels violating UNCLOS in Indian ocean by entering into Exclusive Economic Zones of countries like India is a major threat as well as challenge for free and open Indo pacific region (Arun Prakash, 2017).

China is encircling India to enhance and establish its commercial and infrastructural projects by network of its military and commercial facilities along its sea lines of communication using its policies like "string of pearls" (IOR), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Gwadar Port, Pakistan), Chinese maritime silk road and debt trap lending (Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka) (Mukherjee, 2018). India's economic security demands that all sea lanes leading to Indian Ocean, especially Suez Canal and straits of Malacca to be kept open all the times.

## **MAJOR POWERS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON INDIAN OCEAN REGION**

### **The United States (USA)**

After the end of World War II, The United States was major naval power in the Indian Ocean. But today the US is losing its dominance due to rise of Chinese dominance. The US has strong military leadership with cutting edge technology and its ability to deploy rapidly, makes USA a major power in the IOR. Justin Hastings has stated that the US is well aware of strategic importance of Indian ocean as it has huge Amount of natural resources, mineral deposits, petroleum reserves and strategic location to control world trade through its choke points.

The US has been playing a significant role to counter Chinese dominance and make free and open Indo pacific region for trade and security. The region received considerable significant attention in the recent US National Security Strategy document. The rise of the Indo-Pacific idea has emerged with the US, along with Australia and Japan seeking to draw India into a 'Quadrilateral' security dialogue and 2+2 defence and foreign minister's dialogue and increased maritime interoperability in Indian ocean by conducting exercise like Malabar.

### **China**

In last 30 years China has increased its growth and influence across the world geopolitics. It has recently developed maritime power allowing it to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean

Region. China sees itself the strongest nation in Asia, as It is the number one economic partner of all countries in Asia and wants other countries to accept his hegemony. China's main aim in the Indian Ocean is to control strategic shipping routes to meet its energy requirements. China knows that they have damaged their relations with the US and doesn't want other Asian countries to Unite against them and wants each country to favour them in lobby. Cambodia, Laos and even Malaysia is leaning towards china. China is exploring new trade routes through its Belt and Road Initiative. In order to fulfil its goals, China needs the logistical assistance from regional littoral nations, like it recently acquires from Pakistan, Seychelles, and Oman. With this, it has Strengthen its relations with states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and managed to establish its first ever military base at Djibouti to support China's anti-piracy operations in the Arabian sea region.

Particularly, China is deepening its relations with East African nations to gain strategic edge over other major powers in the IOR. The Chinese ties with Pakistan help them to encircle India from North and also provides them access to Strait of Hormuz and central Asian countries through Pakistan's Gwadar Port (CPEC) for trade and economic development. Chinese investment in Sri Lanka has seen a state-owned firm take charge of port facilities in Hambantota, getting a strategic location to dominate Indian ocean geopolitics. To keep a check on Chinese activities India bought Hambantota airport. China has developed close relations with Maldives, Tanzania, Mozambique and Madagascar in east Africa. China is also exploring port access in the Eastern Indian Ocean region and the Persian Gulf. Indian concerns about China is not only to the Indian Ocean but the capability to encircle India through “string of Pearls” and “Belt and Road Initiative”. China is bound to increase its strategic significance to control the Indian ocean geopolitics as it is totally dependent on Indian ocean region and its choke points for its global trade and energy supplies for its economic development.

### **Australia**

Australia has emerged as the world's largest exporter in the field of Energy and Resources and wants to stop political struggle amongst Asian nations to create peace in Asia. Australia is concerned on how to bypass China and Strengthen its relations with Asian nations for regional cooperation and trade in IOR and South China sea. Australia's recent engagements with India, USA, Japan through Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Malabar maritime exercise in Indian Ocean to enhance its strategic significance in the Indo pacific Region. Australia had sometimes previously positioned itself as an 'Eastern Indian Ocean' power, meaning its visualization of its region stopped at the west coast of India. Within the idea of the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean has started to take on more prominence. Australian foreign policy experts have become more concerned about the US's treatment of its allies. This stress is leading Australia to adopt more diversified foreign and maritime policy. Australia is well aware of increasing Chinese influence in south china sea and other water bodies to control world geopolitics, so they are more aligned towards the US,Japan and India to counter china in Indo pacific region.

Consequently, Australia is looking forward to enhance its relations with India. Australia's perspective to India has recently engrossed on trade and economic stability. Peter Varghese's report “An India Economic Strategy to 2035: Navigating from Potential to Delivery”, has now been accepted by both of Australia's major parties. This report allows deeper economic unification

between Indo-Australia. Australia needs to enhance its relations with India by engaging in domestic politics as well as in Indian ocean geopolitics.

### Japan

Japan has started to play a more dynamic and decisive role in the Indian ocean region. Japan is highly concerned about china's expanding presence in IOR and its security is highly prioritized by Japan to secure its national interests. Chinese presence raises energy concerns, as Japan imports its energy resources from Middle East through Indian Ocean and hence Japan's sea lanes of communication are vulnerable to Chinese submarine attacks. Japan has a natural ally India, whose demography needs it to expand its influence in Indian ocean to safeguard its National interests.

Japan is a world class innovator and provider of technology and its technical assistance can help IOR nations for their economic development. Japan should not only develop infrastructure, defence Equipment and hardware exports but also focus on providing training and education to other nations in the region. By advancing its interests in Indian ocean and supplying technologies, Japan is playing a significant role in IOR by cooperating with the US, India, Australia and other regional countries to promote common interests and to safeguard its national interests.

### India

After the end of World War II in 1945, Indian strategist and diplomat KM Panikkar said that 'whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at its mercy' and that India could not be stable or developed 'unless the Indian Ocean is free and her own shores fully protected' (Panikkar,2005). India wants Multipolar Asia and seems quite aware of China's increasing Influence in Indian ocean. India wants stable relations with China but imbalance of trade creates problem. There were Doubts over India's ability to make a bid for hegemony, though, are largely due to the simultaneous influence of china and US presence in IOR.

Indian occupies a central and unique strategic location to dominate Indian Ocean region and makes India a natural leader in south Asia. Its national, economic and maritime interests are closely Acquainted with Indian Ocean to keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of Peace free from superpower rivalry and to enhance cooperation among littoral nations in the region has always been India's foreign Policy's agenda for example Look East policy, Act East Policy, IORA, BIMSTEC and Mekong -ganga cooperation (MGC).

India wants to focus on development of its economy as well as advanced technology to move towards capitalism. India being a peninsular nation has huge marine resources in its exclusive economic zone and its strategic maritime location to enhance its influence in the entire Indian Ocean Region, through diplomatic ties, trade, investment, and strategic ties. India wants to expand its global impact and wants to attract ASEAN nations like Taiwan, Philippines by supporting Vietnam. By enhancing relations with Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asian regions highly rich in mineral deposits and energy reserves critical to India's strategic and economic advancements and great power aspirations by strengthening its tri service command as

well as maritime inter-operability with other littoral nations like Maldives, Singapore, Seychelles, Mauritius and Oman to have control over major choke points secure in IOR using soft power.

Recently, India's maritime strategies are focused on increased influence of China in Indian Ocean through its debt trap lending and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The US, Japan and Australia are trying to draw India into a new, and deeper relationship through QUAD, 2+2 ministerial dialogue and Malabar maritime Exercise with them in order to maintain control of the Indian Ocean. For India's economic transformation, Japan can be the best partner and India also wants to strengthen its relations with Australia and other South East Asian littoral countries to build good relations. India's strategic discourse tends to highlight Indian Ocean spaces with prominent Indian populations. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks of this Diaspora as an integral part of an India that transcends its borders. His visits around the Indian Ocean littoral have largely been up and down the East coast of Africa, focused on states with Indian diasporic populations.

## CONCLUSION

India being a peninsular country needs to realise the extreme importance of its strategic location as well as proper management of maritime resources. The issue of energy supply through the strategic sea lanes is a basic concern on the sensitive choke-points on the western and eastern edges of the region which have major geo-strategic significance and trade flow. There are many reasons which cannot be ignored at this present time like drug trafficking, religious disputes, terrorism at global level and piracy due to its location. India needs to realise and act like a major power by building strategic foreign policy and utilise its demographic and economic assets with strong government policies. Lastly, a researcher wants to convey that we are not self sufficient in most of the areas of naval and defence technology, by cooperation and inter-operability with other major naval powers in the region would be more fruitful for our national maritime interest. Automatically, it will bring peace, regional stability and nuclear balance in the Indian Ocean. In the emerging geo-political and strategic environment with demographic challenges. India will certainly go ahead with its strong maritime strategy and modernization in defence technology in future.

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