

## **Finding a Balance in the Indian Ocean Region**

by Jeffrey Payne

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The competing maritime claims and confrontations that currently define the Asia-Pacific may represent the future of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The rising prosperity of the Asia-Pacific will mean that the IOR becomes an ever-greater conduit for commercial and energy trading. As the IOR becomes more vital, nations will compete for greater influence throughout the Indian Ocean. This process will require the attention of three established or rising maritime powers: the United States, China, and India. Given the instability that plagues many IOR littoral states and the tense relations between Delhi and Beijing, it will fall to the United States and its strategic allies to maintain IOR stability.

### *Three Players, Three Interests*

Beijing, Delhi, and Washington each recognize the importance of the IOR to their national security. For Beijing, the IOR is a domain where the Chinese state must be able to extend its influence. Billions of dollars a year in trade occurs between China and Europe, the Middle East, and East Africa. A disruption of the IOR Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) could severely harm China's export-dependent economy. Similarly, Chinese economic expansion requires access to increasing amounts of foreign energy deposits. China's energy trade with Russia and the Central Asian Republics helps to fuel a portion of the country, but China depends and will continue to depend on Middle Eastern oil. Therefore, China has slowly increased its visibility in the region, including port investment in Chittagong, Gwadar, and Hambantota (and potentially in Chabahar). The People's Liberation Army Navy is also increasing operations in the Indian Ocean through participation in joint naval exercises, anti-piracy missions, and SLOC patrols.

The IOR remains an active maritime domain for the United States. Not only do US naval assets patrol SLOCs in the Indian Ocean as a security guarantee for commerce, but the US also uses the IOR to mobilize units in the ongoing campaign against terrorist organizations and in support of the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Added to this presence are the US military units that serve as the preeminent force within the Persian Gulf littoral states. The IOR is divided between CENTCOM and PACOM (with AFRICOM responsible for a section as well), the two most active regional combatant commands in the US military. Beyond the US military

presence in the region, the Department of State maintains a complex set of diplomatic relations with the IOR littoral states, as well as securing US alliances with key strategic partners, such as Australia, Thailand, and Bahrain.

For India, the IOR is the nation's backyard. Whereas Beijing and Washington view the Indian Ocean as a domain for protecting commerce and projecting national security objectives, the security of the Indian Ocean determines the stability of the Indian nation. India is suspicious of the presence of other major powers within the IOR, especially China. China's ongoing investment in port facilities throughout South Asia and its longstanding relationship with Pakistan craft a suspicion that China seeks to increase regional hostility against India, maintain tensions between India and Pakistan, and finally, box in Indian commercial and military fleets. While suspicions regarding the United States are not as pronounced, India remains wary of US overtures for strategic coordination due to apprehension that it could drag the Indian military into hostilities in the Asia-Pacific.

### *National Interests, Long-Term Projections*

Trust between these three major IOR powers is low and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. In such an environment, the best chance for stability is enhanced coordination among the United States and its strategic allies. The IOR cannot exist as a non-structured domain for that will only increase the probability of hostility. The Indian Ocean is too important for world commerce and security for there not to be internationally enforced norms.

China's presence in the IOR is for its own material interests. It has never pursued security cooperation arrangements as a part of its foreign policy, seeing such action as over-extending the capacity of its security forces. China is not inherently opposed to cooperation with partners, but will always proceed hesitantly.

India's goal is to be able to guide other nation's activities in the IOR through engagement. Several vital naval joint exercises were begun by India and its foreign ministry pursues strong bilateral relations with IOR countries. The complication with following India's lead is that the country remains limited by the lingering impact of its nonalignment days and its reluctance to integrate China into cooperative frameworks. In short, India's strategic vision remains shallow.

The United States, with strategic alliances in the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and the Southern Indian Ocean, leads a decades-long tradition of joint security operations in the IOR. The framework established encourages the participation of new players and its network of partners extends from the Mediterranean to the far reaches of the Asia-Pacific. Simply put, the United States protects international commerce and the

energy trade in a manner that inhibits the escalation of tensions in the IOR. The major problem with the continued lead of the United States is that rising regional players, India and China, inherently hesitate with the United States at the point. Yet, it is the US-led strategic partnership that today allows all players to pursue their national interests without tensions escalating beyond control.

#### *IOR Recommendations*

To protect the stability of the IOR going forward, the United States should take the following steps.

First, the IOR must be conceived of as a comprehensive maritime domain. Divisions between CENTCOM's and PACOM's areas of responsibility must not inhibit the development of a strategy that includes the Eastern Coast of Africa, the Persian Gulf, and the South Asian zones of the Indian Ocean. The same logic applies to the regional bureaus operating inside the State Department.

Second, maintain cooperative action with regional allies while increasing engagement with important, but non-allied regional players. The United States does not have the maritime capacity to patrol IOR SLOCs on its own and should protect and enhance cooperation with allied and non-allied countries that share mutual interests. Such a network can serve as an enticement for other nations to participate by lowering the costs of partnership.

Third, build upon existing structures and/or create new cooperative platforms that integrate India and China, while recognizing divergent national interests held by these two rising powers. The United States should engage both countries on a bilateral basis. Doing so will allow the grievances of India and China to be made clear, while also providing a private setting through which the United States can push its case. With both India and China's naval and commercial interests only recently taking a serious interest in the whole IOR, there exists opportunity to build cooperative arrangements. The multinational arrangements led by the US favor every party in the long run. That should remain the US credo in its operations in the IOR and when engaging with India and China.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*