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Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: Maritime Security, Trade Routes, and Strategic Competition Sub-theme: International Relations and Geopolitics

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Abstract- The Indian Ocean has emerged as one of the most strategically significant maritime spaces in the contemporary world because it connects major energy corridors, commercial sea-lanes, and densely populated littoral regions. This paper examines how maritime security, trade routes, and strategic competition have turned the Indian Ocean into a crucial arena of 21st century geopolitics. It argues that the region can no longer be understood merely as a transit zone for global commerce; rather, it has become a contested political space where naval expansion, port infrastructure, connectivity projects, and regional diplomacy are reshaping the balance of power. The study focuses on key chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca, whose security directly affects international trade, energy supply, and regional stability. It further analyzes the growing involvement of India, China, the United States, and other Indo-Pacific actors in the region, paying special attention to questions of sea control, maritime influence, and strategic access. At the same time, the paper highlights the concerns of smaller littoral states, whose economic interests and security anxieties are often overshadowed by great-power competition. By linking strategic studies with economic and regional perspectives, the paper aligns with the conference objective of promoting global dialogue and interdisciplinary inquiry into contemporary challenges. It contends that a stable Indian Ocean order will depend not only on military capability, but also on cooperative security frameworks, respect for international maritime norms, and inclusive regional engagement. The paper ultimately seeks to show that the future of the Indian Ocean will be shaped as much by dialogue and diplomacy as by competition and force.

Keywords- Indian Ocean, maritime security, chokepoints, sea-lanes of communication, Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Strait of Malacca, Indo-Pacific, seaborne trade, strategic competition

I. Introduction

The Indian Ocean has become central to contemporary geopolitics because it sits at the intersection of energy transport, commercial shipping, and strategic access. Maritime transport carries around 80 percent of world trade by volume, and global maritime trade reached 12.3 billion tons in 2023. That scale alone would make the ocean important, but its strategic weight comes from concentration rather than volume alone. A small number of narrow passages connect the hydrocarbon-rich Gulf, the industrial economies of Asia, the markets of Europe, and the emerging resource frontiers of Africa. When these routes function normally, global commerce appears routine; when they are disrupted, the costs of globalization become visible immediately in freight rates, transit times, insurance premiums, and supply insecurity (UNCTAD, 2024).

The region's significance can be measured through two distinct but related indicators. UNCTAD's 2024 mapping of maritime chokepoints shows that, in 2023, the Strait of

Malacca accounted for 23.7 percent of global seaborne trade volume, the Strait of Hormuz for 11.1 percent, and Bab el-Mandeb for 8.7 percent. EIA data, using a different metric, show that oil flows through the Strait of Malacca averaged 23.7 million barrels per day in 2023, flows through Hormuz averaged 20.9 million barrels per day, and flows through Bab el-Mandeb averaged 8.6 million barrels per day. These are not interchangeable measures, but they point in the same direction: the Indian Ocean is a route-concentrated system in which a few passages carry a disproportionate share of world commerce and energy movement (UNCTAD, 2024; U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2024).

This paper argues that the Indian Ocean should be analyzed not as a passive transit basin but as a contested strategic arena. The issue is not simply movement across water. It is the politics of access, protection, monitoring, denial, and dependence. In this environment, maritime security cannot be reduced to naval combat alone. Insecurity also appears through piracy, attacks on merchant shipping, coercive pressure on logistics chains, insurance shocks, freight inflation, and unequal exposure among littoral states. The Indian Ocean therefore matters because military power, commercial vulnerability, and diplomatic bargaining are all compressed into the same maritime space (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2025; UNCTAD, 2024).

II. Research Objective

The principal objective of this paper is to explain how maritime security, trade-route concentration, and strategic competition have made the Indian Ocean a decisive arena of twenty-first-century geopolitics. The paper seeks to move beyond vague claims about the region's 'importance' by showing, with evidence, how chokepoint dependence converts geography into political leverage and economic vulnerability.

A second objective is to evaluate the significance of the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca in relation to global trade, oil and LNG flows, and route disruption. A third objective is to assess the extent to which regional institutions, legal-cooperation mechanisms, and multinational naval partnerships provide order in the Indian Ocean—and where their limits remain visible in periods of acute disruption.

III. Research Questions

- Why has the Indian Ocean become a central arena of contemporary geopolitics?
- How do the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca shape global trade and energy security?
- What are the principal institutional and operational elements of the Indian Ocean's maritime security architecture?
- How do route disruptions in the Indian Ocean translate into higher costs, longer transit times, and strategic vulnerability?
- Why do smaller littoral states remain essential to Indian Ocean order while also being exposed to the costs of great-power competition?

IV. Methodology / Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative-analytical approach supported by quantitative evidence from official and intergovernmental sources. The analysis relies on secondary materials from UN Trade and Development, the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the International Maritime Organization, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Combined Maritime Forces, and official Indian policy statements. The method is evidence-led rather than merely descriptive: shipping data, institutional structures, and route vulnerability are used to support geopolitical interpretation rather than decorate it.

Three analytical lenses are used. The first is strategic geography, which examines chokepoints, sea-lane concentration, and access corridors. The second is political economy, which links maritime disruptions with freight costs, energy exposure, and trade vulnerability. The third is institutional analysis, which evaluates how far existing arrangements provide order, information-sharing, and response capacity in the absence of a single integrated regional security regime. This blended approach is necessary because the Indian Ocean problem cannot be understood through naval power alone or through trade statistics alone; it emerges from their interaction.

V. Conceptual and Strategic Significance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is strategically significant because it connects production zones, consumption centres, and energy exporters that are critical to the global economy. Its value does not derive simply from its size. It derives from concentration. Large volumes of oil, LNG, containers, and manufactured goods move through a narrow set of passages whose disruption imposes costs far beyond the immediate conflict zone. That is why Indian Ocean geopolitics cannot be understood through territorial logic alone. The key issue is route dependence: the more trade and energy flows are compressed into a few maritime corridors, the more those corridors become sites of pressure, deterrence, and bargaining (UNCTAD, 2024; EIA, 2024).

The Indian Ocean is also the maritime hinge of Asian energy security. EIA estimates that 83 percent of the crude oil and condensate moving through the Strait of Hormuz in 2023 went to Asian markets, while China, India, Japan, and South Korea together accounted for 69 percent of Hormuz crude and condensate flows to Asia. That gives the region a sharper strategic meaning than generic ‘connectivity’: it is the principal maritime system through which major Asian economies sustain industrial activity and energy demand. Any disruption in this system affects not only shipping but also refinery planning, electricity generation, inflation, and external policy choices (EIA, 2024).

The political language of the region reflects this dual character. India’s SAGAR vision—Security and Growth for All in the Region—captures the point that maritime stability and economic development are not separate questions. Open sea-lanes do not maintain themselves. They depend on surveillance, legal norms, response capacity, and a degree of political restraint among competing powers. Yet the language of cooperation should not be mistaken for the absence of rivalry. Ports, islands, logistics

agreements, and maritime domain awareness networks matter because they shape who can respond fastest, remain on station longest, and sustain presence during crisis (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

Recent rerouting patterns make the argument concrete. UNCTAD reported that by mid-2024 ship tonnage arriving at the Gulf of Aden had fallen by 76 percent, tonnage transiting the Suez Canal had fallen by 70 percent, and arrivals at the Cape of Good Hope had risen by 89 percent. That is not a marginal fluctuation. It shows that insecurity in or adjacent to the Indian Ocean can rapidly reconfigure global maritime geography. The resulting increase in distance, voyage duration, and operating cost explains why the region is better understood as a strategic hinge rather than a mere transport zone (UNCTAD, 2024).

VI. Maritime Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean does not possess a single integrated security organization comparable to a treaty-bound alliance. Its maritime order is instead built through layered and overlapping mechanisms. Those mechanisms can be grouped into four categories: diplomatic-regional institutions, naval dialogue forums, legal and capacity-building frameworks, and operational coalitions. This arrangement is functional but fragmented. It reflects the political diversity of the region and the reluctance of many states to subordinate maritime security to a centralized command structure.

At the diplomatic-regional level, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is the key platform. Its charter identifies maritime safety and security as a priority area alongside trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, academic and scientific cooperation, and tourism and cultural exchanges. That framing matters because it treats maritime security as part of a broader regional order rather than as a purely military issue. IORA's limits are equally clear: it is built on consultation and cooperation, not on enforcement, and it therefore works best as a norm-setting and agenda-shaping forum rather than as a crisis-response mechanism (Indian Ocean Rim Association [IORA], 2014).

At the professional-naval level, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) serves a different purpose. It is a voluntary and inclusive initiative intended to promote maritime cooperation among the navies of Indian Ocean littoral states. Its value lies in communication, confidence-building, and practical familiarity among naval professionals. That sounds modest, but it matters in a region where mistrust and asymmetry are persistent. Dialogue does not remove rivalry, yet it can reduce miscalculation and improve coordination in search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, or crisis communication (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium [IONS], n.d.).

A third layer is represented by the Djibouti Code of Conduct under the IMO. Originally adopted in 2009 for the repression of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, it created a framework for cooperation in investigation, arrest, interdiction, rescue, information-sharing, and capacity building. This framework is important because it demonstrates that some of the most practical

security cooperation in the region developed in response to piracy and non-state threats rather than from great-power diplomacy alone (IMO, n.d.).

The fourth layer consists of operational coalitions. Combined Maritime Forces describes itself as a 47-nation maritime partnership operating across approximately 3.2 million square miles of international waters. The continued relevance of such a coalition reveals a blunt reality: in the western Indian Ocean and adjacent seas, commercial navigation still depends heavily on sustained multinational naval presence. The same point is reinforced by incident data. IMO's 2024 annual report recorded 91 incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore area, 19 in the Indian Ocean, and 7 in the Arabian Sea. These figures do not prove systemic collapse, but they do show that the regional security order still has to address both state competition and non-state disorder at the same time (Combined Maritime Forces [CMF], n.d.; IMO, 2025).

Table 1. Functional Layers of the Indian Ocean Maritime Security Architecture

Layer	Institution / mechanism	Core role	Main limitation
Diplomatic-regional	IORA	Norm-setting, agenda coordination, regional consultation	No enforcement capability
Naval dialogue	IONS	Confidence-building and professional cooperation among navies	Not a collective defence structure
Legal / capacity-building	Djibouti Code of Conduct	Information-sharing, training, anti-piracy coordination	Originated around piracy, not full-spectrum rivalry
Operational coalition	Combined Maritime Forces	Multinational maritime security patrols and task-force operations	Depends heavily on sustained external participation

VII. Strategic Importance of Key Chokepoints

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is concentrated in three principal chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca. These are not interchangeable passages. Each has a distinct strategic function, but all three share one characteristic: they convert maritime geography into geopolitical leverage by concentrating transit into narrow and vulnerable corridors.

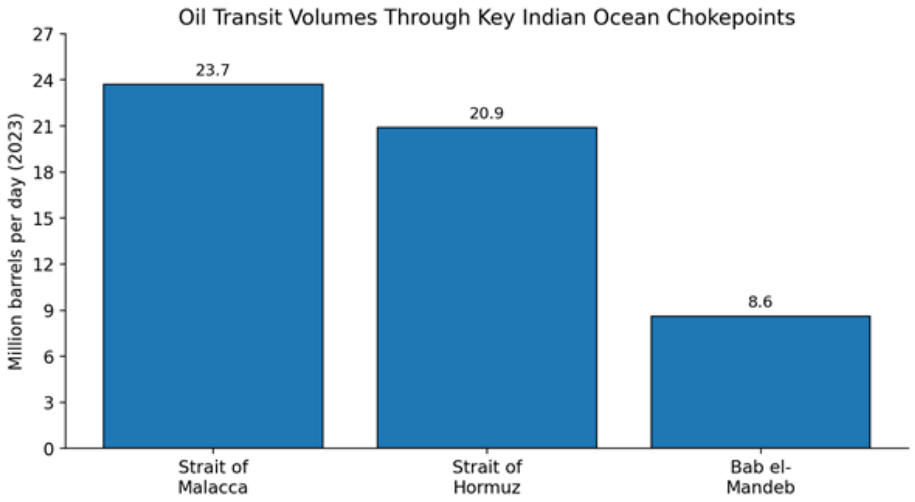

Figure 1. Oil transit volumes through key Indian Ocean chokepoints in 2023.

Source: Based on EIA (2024).

VIII. Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is the most consequential energy chokepoint in the Indian Ocean system. In 2023, oil flows through the strait averaged 20.9 million barrels per day, equivalent to about 20 percent of global petroleum liquids consumption. EIA also notes that flows through Hormuz accounted for more than one-quarter of total global seaborne traded oil and around one-fifth of global LNG trade in 2023. These figures explain why the strait is not simply a route but a strategic pressure point. A crisis in Hormuz would affect not only Gulf exporters but also Asian importers, tanker markets, refinery planning, and the pricing of energy security itself (EIA, 2024).

Its vulnerability is intensified by weak substitution options. EIA estimates that only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have operating crude oil pipelines capable of bypassing the strait, and that about 2.6 million barrels per day of effective unused capacity might be available to circumvent Hormuz in the event of disruption. That is far below normal transit volume. The implication is obvious: alternatives exist, but they do not remove systemic dependence. Hormuz therefore matters not because closure is certain, but because credible threat alone can reshape strategic calculations (EIA, 2024).

IX. Bab el-Mandeb

Bab el-Mandeb links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, making it indispensable for traffic moving between Europe and Asia through the Suez route. In 2023, oil flows through the strait averaged 8.6 million barrels per day, while LNG flows averaged 4.0 billion cubic feet per day. EIA treats the Bab el-Mandeb-Suez-SUMED corridor as a connected strategic system that accounted for roughly 11 percent of total seaborne-traded oil and about 8 percent of worldwide LNG trade in 2023. This makes

the corridor strategically consequential even when it carries lower volumes than Hormuz or Malacca (EIA, 2024).

Bab el-Mandeb is especially significant because insecurity there immediately converts into rerouting costs. EIA reports that disruption in Bab el-Mandeb or the Suez Canal forces ships from the Persian Gulf to north-western Europe onto a much longer route around the Cape of Good Hope, nearly doubling travel time. Between December 2023 and February 2024, at least 444,000 barrels per day of Middle Eastern crude oil and at least 455,000 barrels per day of oil products from India and the Middle East were diverted around the Cape instead of using Bab el-Mandeb and Suez. By February 2024, all LNG cargoes through Bab el-Mandeb in both directions had stopped. That is the strategic meaning of chokepoint disruption: not absolute blockade, but a sudden increase in distance, delay, and cost (EIA, 2024).

X. Strait of Malacca

The Strait of Malacca is the Indian Ocean's eastern hinge. In 2023, oil flows through Malacca averaged 23.7 million barrels per day and LNG flows averaged 9.0 billion cubic feet per day. UNCTAD separately estimates that the strait accounted for 23.7 percent of global seaborne trade volume in 2023. The coincidence of scale across trade and energy metrics reflects the strait's exceptional importance. Malacca connects the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and the wider Pacific trading system, making it central to East Asian energy imports, export manufacturing, and inter regional shipping efficiency (UNCTAD, 2024; EIA, 2024).

Alternative routes exist, but that does not solve the strategic problem. EIA notes that China has pursued partial diversification through overland pipelines, including the Myanmar-China crude oil pipeline, which carried 219,000 barrels per day in 2023. Yet that remains a small fraction of total maritime flows through Malacca. The underlying logic therefore remains unchanged: alternatives reduce risk at the margin but do not replace the principal route. Malacca continues to embody the overlap between commercial efficiency and geopolitical vulnerability (EIA, 2024).

XI. Trade Routes, Energy Flows, and Commercial Connectivity

The Indian Ocean's trade significance lies in the interaction of route concentration and commercial interdependence. Gulf hydrocarbons, Asian manufacturing exports, European consumption markets, and African resource flows intersect within one maritime system. That means disruption in one segment can produce costs across the whole chain. UNCTAD's 2024 review shows how quickly these effects appear: by mid-2024, Gulf of Aden tonnage was down 76 percent, Suez Canal tonnage was down 70 percent, and Cape of Good Hope arrivals were up 89 percent. This was not merely a logistical inconvenience; it represented a forced restructuring of shipping geography (UNCTAD, 2024).

The economic consequences are measurable. UNCTAD reports that rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope increased global vessel demand by 3 percent and container-ship demand by 12 percent. It also reports that a ship travelling from Shenzhen to

Rotterdam would typically travel about 10,000 nautical miles in around 31 days via the Suez Canal, but about 13,000 nautical miles in around 41 days if diverted around the Cape of Good Hope. The China Containerized Freight Index rose by roughly 120 percent between October 2023 and June 2024, with the Red Sea crisis identified as the most significant contributor to that increase. These figures show that the Indian Ocean is not merely a route system; it is also a pricing system through which insecurity is transmitted into global trade costs (UNCTAD, 2024).

For energy markets, the same logic applies. The question is usually not whether cargo will move at all; cargo often still moves. The real question is whether it moves at acceptable cost, within predictable time, and through politically secure routes. When the answer becomes uncertain, import-dependent economies face higher exposure. Small states and vulnerable economies are hit first, but larger powers are not insulated. Commercial connectivity in the Indian Ocean therefore depends on more than open water. It depends on reliable passage through narrow corridors whose disruption produces outsized consequences (UNCTAD, 2024; EIA, 2024).

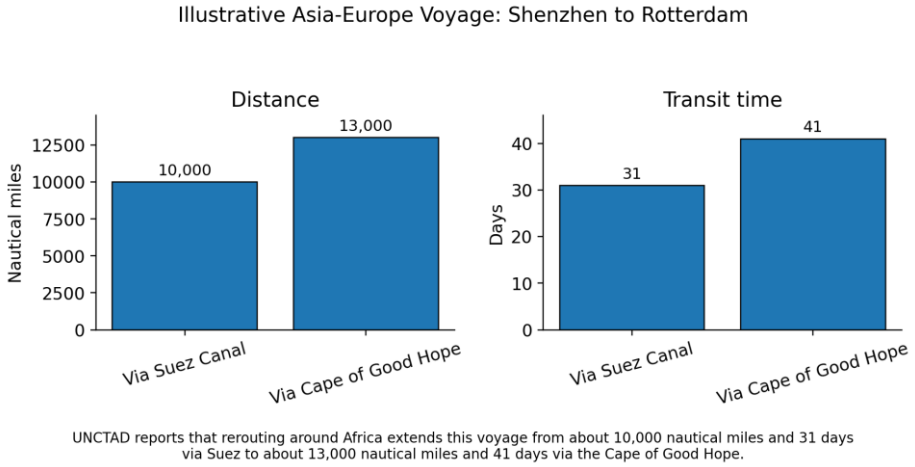

Figure 2. Route comparison for an illustrative Asia-Europe voyage (Shenzhen-Rotterdam).

Source: Based on UNCTAD (2024). EIA (2024) separately notes that Persian Gulf-to-north-western Europe voyages may see travel time nearly double when rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope.

XII. India's Role in the Indian Ocean

India's approach to the Indian Ocean is anchored in a resident-power conception of regional order rather than in formal alliance politics. Its official vocabulary has consistently linked security with development and regional partnership, most visibly through SAGAR and related Indo-Pacific formulations. That language is not mere diplomatic ornament. In February 2025, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar explicitly connected India's maritime strategy to a "common operating picture," shared

platforms, coastal surveillance radars, white-shipping agreements, and the role of the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). The strategic significance of this approach lies in method rather than scale: India is trying to shape Indian Ocean order through awareness, information fusion, and partner-facing maritime capacity rather than through openly declared bloc politics (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2025a).

This strategy is visible in India's engagement with smaller island and littoral states. The official 2024 India–Seychelles bilateral brief states that India gifted and installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in Seychelles in 2015, provided two Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft, transferred patrol assets, and continued the LAMITYE joint exercise series, with the tenth edition held in March 2024. These measures matter because they show that India's regional influence is being built through surveillance networks, platform support, training, and recurring operational familiarity. They are not symbolic gestures; they are the infrastructure of a maritime partnership model that deepens operational dependence without requiring a heavy permanent footprint (MEA, 2024b).

Mauritius illustrates the same pattern with a broader institutional scope. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's March 2025 visit, India and Mauritius concluded a technical agreement on sharing white-shipping information and signed an MoU between the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services and the Mauritian department responsible for continental shelf, maritime zones administration, and exploration. In substantive terms, India's Indian Ocean strategy combines maritime domain awareness, hydrographic and ocean-governance cooperation, technical assistance, and political signaling. The underlying logic is straightforward: India seeks influence through dense functional interdependence with regional partners rather than through a blunt basing template (MEA, 2025b).

India's problem is not conceptual weakness but material asymmetry. SIPRI estimates that India's military expenditure reached US$86.1 billion in 2024, while China spent US$314 billion and the United States US$997 billion. Those figures eliminate any lazy narrative that India can simply outspend its major rivals in the maritime domain. It cannot. Its relative advantage lies elsewhere: geography, political familiarity in the Indian Ocean, naval proximity to major sea-lanes, and a lower-friction model of partner capacity-building that is often easier for smaller states to accept than overt great-power militarization. That does not make India dominant. It does make India regionally embedded in ways that larger extra-regional actors are not (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2025; MEA, 2025a).

Table 2. India's Indian Ocean strategy toolkit

Dimension	**Key instruments**	**Illustrative evidence**	**Strategic significance**
Doctrine	SAGAR; Indo-Pacific framing	Official emphasis on security linked to regional growth	Provides political legitimacy for

Dimension	Key instruments	Illustrative evidence	Strategic significance
		and maritime stability	India's role as a resident power
Maritime domain awareness	IFC-IOR; white-shipping agreements; coastal radar chains	Shared operating picture, surveillance cooperation, data exchange	Improves monitoring of shipping and unlawful activity without bloc formation
Partner capacity-building	Patrol vessels, Dornier aircraft, training, hydrography	Seychelles and Mauritius cases; recurring bilateral exercises	Builds long-term dependence and operational familiarity with smaller states
Operational presence	Sustained naval deployments in the Northern Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden	Indian statements on prolonged deployment during maritime insecurity	Signals responsiveness and regional commitment despite lower spending scale

Source: Compiled from MEA (2024b, 2025a, 2025b) and SIPRI (2025).

XIII. China's Expanding Maritime Presence

China's role in the Indian Ocean can no longer be treated as incidental to its Pacific priorities. The clearest proof is Djibouti. The U.S. Department of Defense's 2024 China Military Power Report states that the PLA support base in Djibouti extends China's military reach and strategic influence in Africa and the Middle East. The same report notes that the base's pier is fully operational and likely capable of accommodating aircraft carriers, other large combatants, and submarines. That moves the discussion beyond speculation. China already possesses a functioning overseas military foothold at the western gateway of the Indian Ocean system (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 2024b).

The more difficult question is whether Djibouti is exceptional or part of a wider strategic pattern. The same DoD report states that, beyond Djibouti, the People's Republic of China is very likely considering and planning additional military logistics facilities to support the projection of naval, air, and ground forces. It identifies countries including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Mozambique, Bangladesh, and others as locations China has likely considered. This does not prove that every Chinese port project is a covert naval base. That claim would be analytically careless. What it does establish is that Chinese overseas infrastructure,

access planning, and security requirements are no longer cleanly separable from one another in the way they once were (DoD, 2024b).

The DoD report makes the relationship between infrastructure and strategic reach even clearer by noting that some Belt and Road Initiative projects could create potential military advantages, including access to foreign ports for Pre-positioning logistics support to sustain naval deployments as far as the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic. That is the disciplined way to frame the issue. The question is not whether every commercial project becomes a base; it is whether commercial presence can generate military utility under favourable political conditions. On the evidence currently available, the answer is yes. China's Indian Ocean position is therefore best understood as a layered structure of commercial access, logistics potential, political leverage, and selective military presence (DoD, 2024b).

This matters because China's vulnerability is concentrated in the same maritime system. The 2024 DoD report explicitly links Chinese strategic concern to sea-lines of communication extending toward the Strait of Hormuz and Africa. In other words, China's Indian Ocean activism is not simply expansion for expansion's sake. It is tied to the protection of trade, energy supplies, overseas citizens, and growing foreign assets. China does not need absolute command of the Indian Ocean to alter the regional balance. It needs sufficient logistics depth, port access, and naval sustainability to reduce its own exposure and complicate the calculations of India, the United States, and smaller littoral states (DoD, 2024b).

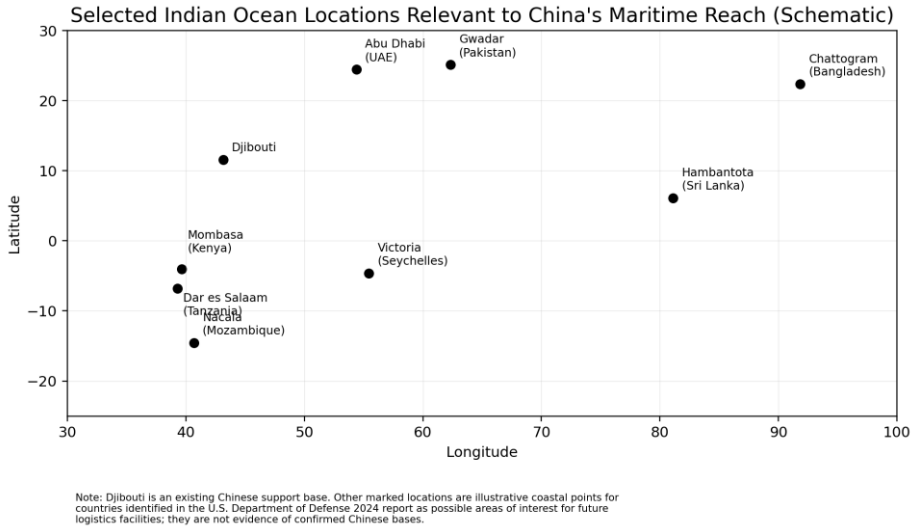

Figure 3. Selected Indian Ocean locations relevant to China's maritime reach

Source: Schematic representation based on DoD (2024b). Djibouti is an existing Chinese support base; the remaining points are illustrative coastal locations for countries identified in the report as possible areas of interest for future logistics facilities.

XIV. Role of the United States and Other Indo-Pacific Actors

The United States remains the most operationally capable extra-regional military actor affecting Indian Ocean security. That judgment rests on two kinds of evidence. First, Operation Prosperity Guardian was announced in December 2023 under the umbrella of Combined Maritime Forces and Task Force 153 to defend shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Second, SIPRI's 2024 expenditure dataset shows the scale advantage underlying American maritime reach: U.S. spending reached US$997 billion, more than three times China's and vastly above India's. The first fact demonstrates operational capacity; the second shows the resource base behind it. The western Indian Ocean is precisely where commercial disruption begins to translate into freight shocks, insurance costs, and strategic anxiety, which is why American coalition-response capability remains consequential (DoD, 2023; SIPRI, 2025).

The Quad has also become more practical than many critics admit. The official fact sheet for the 2024 Quad Leaders' Summit states that the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, launched in 2022, has been scaled across the Indo-Pacific through the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, Southeast Asian partnerships, and the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region in Gurugram. The same document reports that the Quad has helped well over two dozen countries gain access to dark-vessel maritime-domain-awareness data. It also announced MAITRI, a new regional Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific, with India set to host the inaugural workshop in 2025. This is not decorative summit language. It is a measurable effort to combine data, training, law-enforcement capability, and maritime coordination (MEA, 2024c).

The normative dimension is equally important. The 2024 Quad Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement reaffirmed that maritime disputes must be resolved peacefully in accordance with international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), emphasized freedom of navigation and overflight, and described UNCLOS as the legal framework within which all ocean activities must be conducted. Maritime governance in the Indian Ocean cannot rely only on patrol vessels and naval deployments; it also depends on shared legal principles that limit coercion and keep sea-lanes usable for commerce (MEA, 2024a).

Other Indo-Pacific actors strengthen this wider security web. The 2023 India–France Indo-Pacific Roadmap committed both states to deepen maritime-security coordination through IFC-IOR in India, EMASoH in the United Arab Emirates, Atalanta, the Regional Coordination Operations Centre in Seychelles, the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar, and ReCAAP in Singapore. AUSMIN 2024 reaffirmed support for Indian Ocean countries and regional architecture, and underscored support for IORA as the region's premier ministerial-level forum. Japan's 2023 FOIP plan adds another layer by stating that, in the Indian Ocean, Tokyo supports maritime rescue, nautical chart preparation, coast-guard capacity, and vessel-traffic services. The pattern is clear: Indian Ocean order is increasingly sustained by overlapping partnerships, information-sharing arrangements, and capacity-building

networks rather than by a single alliance system (MEA, 2023; DoD, 2024a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023).

XV. Strategic Competition and Smaller Littoral States

Smaller littoral and island states are central to Indian Ocean geopolitics because access, legitimacy, and maritime infrastructure are mediated through them. Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, Comoros, and others are not background scenery for great-power competition. Their ports, exclusive economic zones, airstrips, maritime agreements, and diplomatic decisions influence the regional balance because outside powers need local cooperation for surveillance, logistics, training, and political acceptance. India's arrangements with Mauritius and Seychelles, and China's established presence in Djibouti, both show that major-power strategies are filtered through smaller states rather than imposed in a vacuum (MEA, 2024b; MEA, 2025b; DoD, 2024b).

But the existence of agency should not be romanticized. Structural vulnerability remains severe. UN Trade and Development reports that, excluding the four big hub small island developing States, the average liner-shipping connectivity of SIDS is more than five times lower than that of non-SIDS. The same report and related UNCTAD materials warn that freight shocks generated by maritime disruption could raise global consumer prices by 0.6 percent by the end of 2025, while SIDS could face a still higher increase of around 0.9 percent. That is the real asymmetry. Smaller states may bargain, hedge, and diversify, but they still face higher trade costs, weaker connectivity, and lower resilience when major routes are disrupted (UN Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

This point matters for the politics of "inclusive regionalism." A maritime order that secures sea-lanes for major importing and exporting powers while leaving small states exposed to higher shipping costs, fragile connectivity, and coercive dependence is not stable; it is merely unequal. Any serious governance framework for the Indian Ocean has to address the material interests of smaller states, not just invoke them rhetorically. Maritime domain awareness, hydrography, coast-guard support, navigational safety, resilient ports, and affordable shipping links are not side issues. They are conditions for making regional order credible (UNCTAD, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023).

XVI. Data-Driven Analysis of Shipping, Trade, Energy, and Naval Presence

The strategic structure of the Indian Ocean becomes clearer when trade concentration is read alongside defense asymmetry. UNCTAD estimates that in 2023 the Strait of Malacca accounted for 23.7 percent of global seaborne trade volume, the Strait of Hormuz for 11.1 percent, and Bab el-Mandeb for 8.7 percent. In parallel, the energy-flow evidence assembled, showed very large oil transit volumes moving through the same chokepoint system. These are different metrics, but together they point to the same reality: the Indian Ocean is a concentrated route architecture through which a

disproportionate share of world commerce and energy movement passes. That concentration is what turns disruption into geopolitical leverage (UNCTAD, 2024).

Now set those commercial figures beside military spending. SIPRI's 2024 estimates place U.S. military expenditure at US$997 billion, China's at US$314 billion, and India's at US$86.1 billion. The implication is not that money alone determines influence. It does not. But it does reveal the unequal material foundations beneath Indian Ocean competition. The United States operates from unmatched expeditionary and coalition capacity. China combines large-scale resources with infrastructure reach and expanding logistics options. India relies more heavily on geographic centrality, regional networks, and partner familiarity. These are different models of maritime influence operating over the same chokepoint-heavy trading system (SIPRI, 2025; DoD, 2024b).

Recent disruption data reinforce why states care so much about these routes. UNCTAD reports that by mid-2024 ship tonnage crossing the Gulf of Aden had fallen by 76 percent, tonnage transiting the Suez Canal had dropped by 70 percent, and arrivals at the Cape of Good Hope had surged by 89 percent. Longer routes increased global vessel ton-mile demand by 3 percent and container-ship demand by 12 percent. These are not just technical shipping statistics. They show how insecurity adjacent to the Indian Ocean quickly converts into longer voyages, higher transport demand, and increased commercial cost. Strategic competition in the region is therefore driven not only by prestige or symbolism, but by the economic consequences of disruption (UNCTAD, 2024).

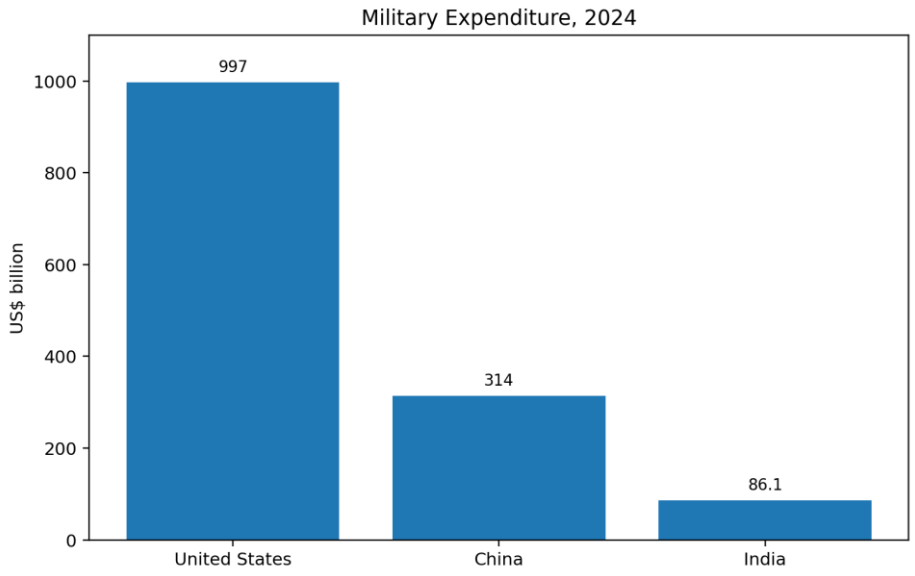

Figure 4. Military expenditure of the United States, China, and India, 2024

Source: SIPRI (2025). Values shown in current U.S. dollars, billions.

Table 3. Comparative models of Indian Ocean influence

Actor	Primary resource base	Main operating method	Illustrative mechanisms	Principal limitation
United States	Very high military expenditure and expeditionary capacity	Coalition operations plus maritime deterrence	Operation Prosperity Guardian; CMF-linked frameworks; support for regional architecture	Sustained regional legitimacy depends on partner buy-in
China	Large military spending combined with infrastructure and logistics reach	Infrastructure-linked access and selective overseas military support	Djibouti base; BRI-linked access potential; logistics planning	Regional distrust and the political sensitivity of dual-use infrastructure
India	Lower spending but high geographic centrality and regional familiarity	Networked resident-power strategy and partner capacity-building	IFC-IOR; white-shipping agreements; coastal radar chains; bilateral training and assistance	Material asymmetry relative to the United States and China

Source: Compiled from SIPRI (2025), DoD (2023, 2024a, 2024b), and MEA (2023, 2024a, 2024c, 2025a).

XVII. Cooperative Security, Maritime Governance, and International Norms

A stable Indian Ocean order cannot be built on military competition alone. The evidence assembled in this paper points instead toward a layered model of maritime governance combining deterrence, legal norms, information-sharing, capacity-building, and regional cooperation. The Quad's maritime initiatives matter because they link operational tools such as IPMDA and MAITRI with legal and institutional commitments. India's own emphasis on white-shipping agreements, common maritime awareness, and IFC-IOR points in the same direction. France's coordination road map and AUSMIN's support for Indian Ocean regional architecture reinforce the idea that effective order in the region depends on networks, not a single commanding institution (MEA, 2023; MEA, 2024a; MEA, 2024c; DoD, 2024a).

The harder point is that cooperative security does not mean the disappearance of rivalry. That is fantasy. The real challenge is managed competition. UNCLOS-based norms, freedom of navigation, maritime law-enforcement cooperation, and partner capacity-building are valuable precisely because they can keep competition from escalating into repeated commercial paralysis. Once every port becomes a suspected future base and every maritime initiative is treated as bloc politics, the cost is paid not only in strategic mistrust but in freight inflation, insurance pressure, and declining predictability for the wider trading system. The Indian Ocean will remain competitive. The real question is whether that competition can be bounded by workable rules and practical cooperation (MEA, 2024a; UNCTAD, 2024).

XVIII. Key Findings and Core Arguments

First, the Indian Ocean is a route-concentrated strategic system rather than a neutral transit space. Its geopolitical significance arises from the concentration of trade, energy flows, and maritime access through a few vulnerable corridors (UNCTAD, 2024).
Second, India, China, and the United States pursue distinct models of influence. India relies on regional embedding, domain awareness, and partner capacity-building; China combines infrastructure reach with expanding logistics and military access; the United States retains coalition-based operational dominance supported by overwhelming material scale (MEA, 2025a; DoD, 2024b; DoD, 2023).

Third, smaller littoral states are strategically central but economically more exposed. Their agency is real, but their connectivity is weaker and their exposure to freight shocks is higher than that of larger powers (UNCTAD, 2024).

Fourth, the most plausible basis for long-term Indian Ocean order is neither unilateral command nor empty multilateral rhetoric, but a layered framework combining maritime awareness, law, deterrence, and inclusive capacity-building (MEA, 2024a; MEA, 2024c).

XIX. Conclusion

The Indian Ocean has become one of the decisive geopolitical spaces of the present era because it links energy security, commercial shipping, strategic access, and political influence within a highly concentrated maritime system. India is attempting to shape that space through resident-power legitimacy and maritime partnership networks. China is building a more expansive logistics-and-access structure tied to its overseas interests and military reach. The United States and its partners remain indispensable to coalition-based enforcement and maritime-security support. Smaller states sit at the center of this competition, even though they are usually the least protected against its economic consequences (MEA, 2025a; DoD, 2024b; UNCTAD, 2024).

The future of the Indian Ocean will not be decided by slogans about hegemony or cooperation alone. It will depend on whether major and middle powers can preserve open, lawful, and predictable maritime access while their competition intensifies. If they fail, each chokepoint crisis will continue to spill into higher costs, longer routes,

and greater political coercion. If they succeed, order in the Indian Ocean will rest not on the end of rivalry, but on the management of it (MEA, 2024a; UNCTAD, 2024).

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