

Great Power Rivalry in Indian Ocean: Implications and Options for Pakistan

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean region holds immense significance due to its vital maritime trade routes and abundant natural resources. With intensifying China – U.S. competition for power in Indo-Pacific region, the geopolitical landscape in Indian Ocean is getting increasingly volatile. This research article delves into the geopolitical and strategic significance of the Indian Ocean and its evolving dynamics, primarily focusing on the perspectives of major global players: the USA, China, and India, and its impact on Pakistan. The study explores major developments currently taking place in Indian Ocean including China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Quad alliance, AUKUS agreement, Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation, India's assertive naval buildup, and emergence of new form of asymmetric threats in maritime domain. In the backdrop of neorealist “balance of power theory”, the research elaborates how the hegemonic power competition is upsetting the balance of power, intensifying security dilemma, and igniting arms race in Indian Ocean region. These developments potentially undermine strategic stability in Indian Ocean which could eventually lead to conflicts. The research specifically examines the economic, political, and strategic implications of intensifying power rivalry in Indian Ocean on Pakistan. In addition the study also proposes feasible options for Pakistan to counter the destabilizing consequences of power politics in Indian Ocean.

Key Words: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Quad, AUKUS, Strategic Stability, Balance of Power, Security Dilemma, Arms Race

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1. Introduction

In contemporary world, Indian Ocean has gradually become staging ground for the geopolitical competition and strategic maneuvering among major global powers, like United States and China, and regional powers. The U.S. has traditionally maintained a strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean, asserting its influence and ensuring the security of sea lanes critical for global trade. In contrast, China has been expanding its naval capabilities and infrastructure, aiming to secure its economic interests, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India, with its political ambitions of being regional hegemon (regional policeman), is pushing to become a net-security provider in Indian Ocean. In this push, India is fiercely backed by the United States as both see a common enemy in China. Both the United States as well as India are using all available means to deny access to China in the region of Indian Ocean. The evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean reflect a complex power struggle involving economic, nuclear, military, technological and political dimensions. As these power dynamics unfold, understanding and managing the geopolitical tensions in the Indian Ocean become crucial for the stability and balance of power in the broader international system.

2. Theoretical Framework

Balance of Power (BoP) is one of the key subset of Realist school of thought and has been defined in various ways. Classical or traditional realist scholars such as Hans J. Morgenthau defines it as actual state of affairs signifying the distribution of power among various states having approximate power and capabilities. Other historians define balance of power as power equilibrium among states that inhibits one state from becoming colossally powerful to dictate its will upon other states. As per Palmer and Perkins, BoP underlies countervailing pressures and shifting alliances impeding the growth of either one power or combination of power from becoming strong to an extent that will disrupt security of other states.

Morgenthau while taking a traditional realist perspective and its emphasis on human being dictating the drive for domination and power argues that balance of power can mitigate this behavior and will subsequently ensure order and stability of international system. According to him, the balance of power and its resultant policies aimed at establishment and maintenance of order are deemed quintessential for international political stability. However, his core argument is that balance of power is consequent of struggle for power in which states primarily intend to acquire superiority rather than explicit establishment of balance of power.

On other hand Neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz has developed balance of power as a refined theoretical approach in a scientific and consistent manner. As per him, international political structure causes states to fend for themselves given the prevalence of anarchy in the system. Resultantly, small states engage in act of balancing against more

powerful threatening actor. This implies that balance of power as per Waltz focuses on anarchical international system which in turn characterize self-help puts limits on the states' behavior (Anderson, 2018).

As per neorealism, there are two key ways of balancing: Internal balancing and external balancing. The former implies channelization of resources of states for increasing armaments, resource extraction, prevention of infiltration and revolts, and adequate organization of state in order to strengthen and guard oneself for competing in an effective manner. As far as external balancing goes, it underscores formulation of alliances with the purpose to stop a rising power. Waltz argues, despite the difficulty with respect to state's collaboration, the emergence of existential or common threat led states to put aside their confliction and band together against a threatening-cum-dominating state (Anderson, 2016).

With respect to Indian Ocean Region, balance of power rightly explains the current interplay of geopolitics between states and convergence as well as divergence of states interests. According to BoP, key regional littorals (India, Pakistan) and extra-regional powers (U.S., China, Japan, Australia) have forged coalitions and alliances in order to address security, military and economic concerns emanating from the volatile and ever-changing strategic environment in Indian Ocean. The balancing is evident from the U.S.-led Quad wherein U.S., India, Japan, and Australia have shown a strong commitment for rule-based Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region characterized by democratic values, resolution of military disputes, freedom of navigation and over flight, political integrity, and most importantly rule of law. AUKUS is another manifestation of such alliance formation which although is directed broadly at Indo-Pacific; nonetheless has ramifications for Indian Ocean given the key objective of both Quad and AUKUS as Balancing of Power against the China. The receding influence of U.S. as sole global arbiter alongside the ever-enhancing military and economic might of China manifested through mega Belt and Road Initiative-BRI implies the significance of balancing China through forging allies and forming coalitions (Mohan, 2022). Not only that, to offset China's unhindered economic growth and ever increasing footprint in Indian Ocean, the United States and India have inked various agreements to facilitate ease of operations by their militaries especially navies; improve interoperability between both navies and to provide geospatial intelligence. Bilateral agreements like LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA are strategic in essence and aim to expand Balance of Power in favour of U.S and India against China.

3. Significance of Indian Ocean

Covering over 68,536,000 sq-km, the Indian Ocean constitutes approximately 27 percent of the Earth's water surface. It's surrounded by Asia, Africa, Australia, and Antarctic Ocean, and connects Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. The trade routes transiting through Indian Ocean are vital for commercial shipping and carry significant political and strategic importance. Chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-

Mandeb, Horn of Africa, Suez Canal, and Malacca Strait serve as crucial transit nodes for global trade. Each year, around 80 percent of the world oil and a staggering 9.84 billion tons of cargo is traded through the international se alanes of the Indian Ocean. Littoral states along the Indian Ocean account for 65 percent of the world's oil reserves, and 35 percent of the world's gas resources. In 2020, the total trade reported by the Indian Ocean rim amounted to \$6.17 trillion. Any disruption along these strategically significant routes can have profound implications for the world's energy and economic security (Baruah, 2021).

For the United States, the Indian Ocean is of paramount importance within its Indo-Pacific strategic framework. The network of crucial shipping lanes in Indian Ocean holds pivotal importance for U.S, its strategic interests in the region as well as beyond. The region's energy security and safety and security of sea lanes is a key concern, given the significant portion of the world's oil and gas passing through the chokepoints of Indian Ocean. The U.S. maintains a robust naval presence in Indian Ocean. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain alongside the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, maintains active presence in Indian Ocean. Additionally, the United States military base at Diego Garcia provides it strategic pivot for power projection in entire region. Additionally, US-Navy plays important role in thwarting non-traditional security challenges in Indian Ocean. (Nilanthi, 2023).

China views the Indian Ocean as a key component of its global interests. Almost 80 percent of China's imported crude oil transit through the Strait of Malacca. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, emphasizes infrastructure development and connectivity with the Indian Ocean. In terms of trade relationships, China stands as the leading import partner for twenty-four countries in the Indian Ocean and the primary export partner for thirteen nations. China has gradually expanded its naval presence to safeguard its sea borne trade. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has established first ever overseas base in Djibouti in proximity of strategically important Bab-ul-Mandab strait. A newly constructed pier (berth) is large enough to accommodate aircraft carrier. It is hence obvious that China intends to station and operate its new modern aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean from here in future. An aircraft carrier is a formidable instrument of power projection and sustained operations in blue water. China's increasing naval presence in the region reflects its growing interest in securing sea lanes, protecting overseas interests besides nationals (diaspora) abroad. This fits well with Beijing's expanding economic footprint, ensuring energy security and towards geopolitical aspirations. For Beijing, the Indian Ocean serves as a platform to counterbalance U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region. (Khalid, 2021)

With over 7,500 km of coastline and some 1200 Islands along with offshore oil infrastructure, India is directly influenced by geopolitical developments in Indian Ocean. India is amongst some of the fastest-growing economies in the region, if not beyond. More than 90 percent of India's international trade by volume and over 70 percent by value is carried over the seas. Nearly 80 percent of the country's crude oil requirement is

imported by sea using the international sea lanes across the Indian Ocean. Offshore gas fields also contribute to 80 percent of India's domestic natural gas production. (Indian Maritime Security Strategy, 2014) While oil shipments from Persian Gulf are crucial for India's economic growth, the country aspires greater connectivity with trade markets in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Beyond economic considerations, Indian Ocean is integral to India's security paradigm, allowing New Delhi to assert its influence and project itself as a net-security provider. As China expands its presence in the region, India seeks to preserve and enhance its strategic position, making the Indian Ocean a linchpin for economic growth, security, and regional influence. (Dhruva, 2016)

4. Contemporary Developments in Indian Ocean

The Sino-U.S. competition for power is gradually transforming the geopolitical dynamics of Indian Ocean region. China has enhanced its maritime presence in Indian Ocean through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is periodically increasing its naval footprint to safeguard these projects. United States and India view these developments with major concern and perceive growing Chinese influence as threat to their national interest. To counter China's growing footprint, U.S. has ramped up its naval expansion, developed new regional alliances and has undertaken several strategic agreements with regional powers. In sum, security dynamics, economic interests, and geopolitical competition have created security dilemmas, spurred naval arms race, and have threatened the strategic stability in the Indian Ocean. Short details of major developments underway in the Indian Ocean are stated below.

4.1. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched "One Belt One Road (OBOR)" in 2013 which was re-named as "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" in 2017. BRI comprises of Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and Silk Road Economic Belt. As far as the Silk Road Economic Belt is concerned, it entails overland infrastructure that in turn include existing and proposed networks joining Central Asian states to South Asia, oil-rich Middle East, and beyond to Africa and even Europe. The route of MSR itself implies its strategic significance as it conjoins coastal cities of China with Pacific alongside Indian Ocean. The route extends to volatile South China Sea, Malacca Strait, and Bay of Bengal. It further goes to Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden and to strategically significant Persian Gulf. (Odhiambo, 2020)

4.2. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flag ship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initially valued at \$46 billion, the investment volume of CPEC has increased to \$65 billion as of 2022. (Asif, 2022). CPEC is a vast network of infrastructure projects that includes highways, railways, and energy projects spread throughout country. The most important aspect of CPEC is the connectivity of Gwadar Port in southwestern Pakistan to China's northwestern region of Xinjiang. The port of

Gwadar is strategically located in close proximity to the Strait of Hormuz from where nearly 21 million barrels of oil, equivalent of 21 percent of global oil consumption transits on daily basis (Abdullah, 2023).

While most maritime chokepoints can be bypassed by using other shipping routes, the Strait of Hormuz has no feasible alternative. Therefore, the port holds immense economic and strategic importance, particularly in terms of expanding geopolitical footprint through the maritime domain. (Caliskan, 2022).

With its full functional capability, Gwadar port will provide direct connectivity to China with Persian Gulf, Africa, Middle East and other regions circumventing Strait of Malacca and much talked about infamous “Malacca dilemma”. This will enhance China’s strategic resilience and improve security of energy and trade flows. Additionally, it will provide shortest feasible connectivity between land-locked resource rich Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Arabian Sea (James, 2019). In simple words, Gwadar port project of Pakistan is one of major economic growth project reshaping global economy. It is a perfect hub for the region drawing trade from China, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, and transporting it to other regions via Arabian Sea.

4.3. String of Pearl and Diamond of Necklace Strategies

The United States has always viewed China’s BRI project with great concern. From economic perspective, Washington perceives BRI as manifestation of Beijing’s debt trap diplomacy. This policy, according to Western analysts, may lead to unsustainable levels of debt for participating countries, potentially creating economic dependencies that could compromise their sovereignty. The U.S. government has also raised transparency issues, expressing doubts about the lack of clarity in BRI agreements. From a strategic perspective, the U.S. views China's expanding influence through the BRI as a challenge to its own waning global leadership, raising concerns about the geopolitical implications of China's increased presence in strategically important regions (Daniel, 2022).

India has also repeatedly expressed reservations about China’s BRI project. According to New Delhi, China is periodically encircling India by developing infrastructure at key trade routes under the pretext of BRI, and gradually enhancing naval presence. As discussed in the preceding discourse, this strategy is often termed as “String of Pearls Strategy”. Djibouti is the first state from where strings’ western half starts and China has built its military base in Obock region here. This would allow China to conduct surveillance over Bab-el- Mandeb and other parts of the Western Indian Ocean. Gwadar port is considered by India as the most potent and most concerning point in this string particularly when China-Pakistan collaboration in naval domain is taken into account. Maldives’ Feydhoo Finolhu Island is the home to third base in the western string. As far as eastern half is concerned, it comprises of Bangladesh’s Chittagong port, Myanmar’s Kyaukpyu port, Malaysia’s Kuantan base and Maura base in Brunei. (Nawaz, 2023)

As alluded to earlier, to counter string of pearl strategy of China, India has also been working on similar strategy unofficially dubbed as 'Necklace of Diamonds'. This necklace comprise of Chabahar port in Iran, Oman's Duqm base, naval air-base in Seychelles' Assumption island, tri-service command in Andaman & Nicobar islands, Indonesia's Sabang base, and Singapore's Changi base. Alongside the Necklace of Diamonds, there is another speculated double fish hook strategy which entails amalgamation of military alliance in region with key actors such as U.S., France, Australia, and island states for securing Indian Ocean as well as containing China's maritime endeavors in region. (Nawaz, 2023)

4.4. Quad, AUKUS, and Indian Ocean

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the Quad, is a strategic forum comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Initially established in 2007, the Quad has gained renewed momentum in recent years as a response to growing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. While Quad officially focuses on a range of issues, including economic development, infrastructure, and climate change, but its underlying security dimension has drawn particular attention. This security dimension is underpinned by navies of Quad countries.

Malabar Naval Exercises, although a separate initiative originally conceived during Cold War between navies of the U.S. and India, have now become physical manifestation of the Quad's co-operation in naval domain. The inclusion of Australia in the Malabar Exercises in 2020 expanded Quad's footprint, showcasing a growing regional collaboration within the framework. The joint naval drills contribute to the Quad's efforts to enhance interoperability among its members, fostering better coordination and response capabilities in the maritime domain (Shahid, 2021).

China has termed Quad as Asian NATO, and has characterized Quad as a containment alliance to counter China influence in the region. Chinese officials have repeatedly criticized Quad, arguing that it may disrupt the regional Balance of Power, and can have destabilizing impact on global scale.

Unlike Quad, AUKUS is a purely military agreement. It's the trilateral security partnership between Australia, United Kingdom and United States announced in September 2021. It is perceived as the groundbreaking agreement that aims to enhance defense and security cooperation among the three nations. The centerpiece of AUKUS is the provision of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in a deal worth \$368 billion. These submarines will be configured on Royal Navy's next generation SSN-R project and will be called SSN-AUKUS.

The provision of nuclear propulsion technology for submarines marks first instance in history of sea based strategic deterrence. Australian submarines, as a consequence, will have extended staying time while on operational deployments. In parallel, RAN will be acquiring long-range cruise missiles and F-35 stealth aircrafts from

United States which will significantly enhance the combat outreach of Australian forces. The delivery of cutting-edge technology to the Australian armed forces implies that the Washington is leveraging Australia as a frontline ally in its efforts to counter China. As part of AUKUS, Australia will eventually attain offensive posture instead of traditional defensive posture in Indo-Pacific. This transformation is expected to create new set of strategic complications in entire region. It will intensify arms race and will threaten the strategic stability. In parallel, transfer of submarine related nuclear propulsion tech under the ambit of AUKUS is poised to undermine non-proliferation regimes, encouraging other nations to seek similar capabilities. In sum, AUKUS substantiates the fact that increasing military might of China has reshaped the balance of power, compelling U.S. to undertake extraordinary decisions in order to maintain its global ascendancy.

4.5. Indo-U.S. Strategic Partnership

India and the United States have signed several strategic agreements to enhance bilateral cooperation and safeguard their increasingly overlapping interests in Indo-Pacific. There are three foundational defence agreements between the U.S. and India. These are, Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA); Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA).

LEMOA, signed in 2016, allows the armed forces of two countries to use each other's facilities for replenishment of supplies and services on a reciprocal basis. This agreement streamlines logistical support, facilitating a more efficient response to regional and global contingencies. Signed in 2018, COMCASA enables the secure exchange of communication and military grade data-sharing capabilities between India and the United States. This agreement facilitates the use of advanced defense systems, including encrypted communication equipment. By allowing for secure communication during joint military exercises and operations, COMCASA strengthens the strategic coordination between India and the U.S. It also supports India's efforts to modernize its defense capabilities and promotes the integration of advanced technologies into its military infrastructure. BECA was signed in 2020 and is a critical agreement that enhances the geospatial intelligence-sharing capabilities between both countries. BECA enables the exchange of geospatial information, topographical, nautical, and aeronautical data, allowing military forces of both nations to enhance their situational awareness and improve the accuracy of missile systems, targeting, and navigation. (Philip, 2020)

On one axis, these strategic agreements represent depth of Indo-U.S. strategic partnership, but on another they showcase the shared dilemmas of both nations against China. These agreements are destabilizing in nature as they are compromising the Balance of Power in Indian Ocean, particularly between India and Pakistan. The intensification of security dilemmas in maritime domain has triggered naval arms race which threatens the strategic stability in Indian Ocean.

4.6. India Aggressive Naval Build-Up

Indian Navy is in phase of rapid naval force expansion since last decade with emphasis toward indigenization. This fleet modernization includes commissioning of more warships and submarines. In parallel, the naval aviation and nuclear arm will also be modernized and expanded by incorporating more and superior systems.

India Navy surface combat fleet currently consists of ten destroyers, sixteen frigates, several corvettes, amphibious warships, patrol crafts and support vessels. By 2035, Indian Navy is eyeing to commission 175 warships by adding new vessels and replacing its obsolete surface fleet with additional modern warships. Obsolete Rajput class destroyers are in phase of replacement by four Visakhapatnam class destroyers. Seven new Nilgiri class frigates and four Talwar-III class frigates are in different phases of construction. In parallel, IN will be inducting dozens of new corvettes for surface and sub-surface warfare at regional scale.

IN has recently commissioned its first ever domestically produced air craft carrier named INS Vikrant. (Lendon, 2022) With INS Vikramaditya already in service, INS Vikrant is the second aircraft carrier in IN disposal. There are plans to construct a bigger and more capable aircraft carrier, tentatively called INS Vishal (IAC-02). But till date, no concrete decision has been made due to conflicting debates regarding its feasibility and limitations of resources (Bedi, 2022). Similarly India is expanding its surface-warship fleet by adding more warships with more sophisticated weapons and sensor suite. These warships are of varying tonnage. On higher axis, India is developing destroyers and frigates, while on lower axis it is producing corvettes and patrol vessels. It's worth noting, that India has gradually attained high level of autonomy as far as designing and construction of warships is concerned. (Atri, 2023)

The sub-surface modernization of Indian navy has conventional as well as nuclear dimension. IN is in process of commissioning six Kalveri class diesel electric submarines – a version based on French Scorpene submarine (Vavasseur, 2022). As a follow on project, called Project 75-I, IN is planning to acquire six more submarines with improved capabilities. These submarines will be built after collaboration with domestic and foreign shipyards. Various shipyards in Europe and Asia have submitted their bids for the tender. However, the final submarine design is yet to be decided (Kumar, 2022).

Indian Navy (IN) is also custodian of India's sea-based nuclear strike capability. Currently IN has one operational nuclear ballistic submarine (SSBN) – INS Arihant. Second SSBN, INS Arighat, is expecting commissioning in 2024. (Abhijit, 2023) Third SSBN, designated as S4 or unofficially as Arihant-stretched, was secretly launched on November 23, 2021. (Rahul, 2021) The launch was not reported by official sources suggesting that India wants to keep its sea-based nuclear deterrent up gradation plans secretive. In total, India is expected to induct four SSBNs by 2030, and potentially more at later stages (Sauray, 2016). The expansion of IN SSBN fleet will significantly strengthen

India's sea-borne assured second strike capability. But on flip side it will intensify security perceptions of neighboring nations, particularly Pakistan, forcing them either to take counter actions or develop analogous capabilities. A tabular comparison of India Navy current and future major combatants is given below:

Table: 1

| Warship Type | Total Number in 2023 | Expected Number in 2033s | Comments |
|---|----------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Air Craft Carrier (STOBAR) | 2 | 3 | INS Vishal will be third aircraft carrier |
| Landing Platform Dock (LPD) | 1 | 4 | 4 new LPDs will be built |
| Destroyers (DDGs) | 10 | 18 | 8 NG Heavy Destroyers/ Cruisers will be built |
| Heavy Frigates (6000+ tons) (FFG) | 3 | 10 | 7 Nilgiri class FFG will be operational |
| Standard Frigates (4000+ tons) (FFG) | 9 | 10 | 10 Talwar class frigates will be operational |
| Multi-Mission Corvettes (FFL) | 0 | 8 | 8 NG multi-mission Corvettes will be built |
| Anti-Submarine Corvettes (ASW FFL) | 5 | 16 | 16 ASW Shallow Water Crafts will be operational |
| Missile Corvettes/Boats (ASuW FFL + FACM) | 13 | 6 | Six NG Missile Corvettes will be built |
| Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) | 10 | 21 | 11 NG-OPVs will be built in coming years |
| Mine Countermeasure Vessels (MCMV) | 0 | 12 | 12 new MCMVs will be built |
| Nuclear Ballistic Submarines (SSBN) | 1 | 4 | INS Arihant, INS Arighat and two S-4 class SSBNs |
| Nuclear Attack Submarines (SSN) | 0 | 6 | Six Project 75-A SSNs will be added |
| Hunter Killer Submarines (SSK) | 15 | 18 | Six Type 75-I SSKs will be added |

Contemporary Indian Navy Major Combat Vessels and Future Projection (Hackett et al., 2023)

4.7. New Generation Asymmetric Threats

Iran, although a smaller player in Indian Ocean, has showcased capability to impart significant influence on regional geopolitical environment. As a littoral state with

control over the Strait of Hormuz, Iran has the ability to influence and disrupt maritime traffic in the region. Thus, Iran's geographical proximity to the Persian Gulf provides it with a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean, enabling the country to use its position as a deterrent against the United States and other external actors. Similarly, Bab el-Mandeb, another strategic choke point, is also under the influence of Iran-backed Houthis militia. Both Iran and Houthis have successfully demonstrated their capability to block sea lanes passing through Persian Gulf and Red Sea by employing asymmetric tactics. By controlling these two key choke points of Indian Ocean, Iran has been able to impart its influence at global scale.

Perhaps the most impeding non-traditional threat is currently being witnessed in the Red Sea. Houthis, a non-state faction backed by Iran, have been using missiles and drones to target merchant and naval vessels across Bab-el-Mandab. Majority of these missiles and drones are rudimentary designs, but pose significant threat when employed in mass-strikes. Although Houthis claim that they are targeting American and Israeli merchant vessels only in response of Israel's aggression against Palestine. But situational ambiguity and fog of crisis has placed entire shipping at risk. Numerous shipping companies, including industry giants like Maersk, Shell, and BP, have already halted their operations in the Red Sea. The majority of shipping vessels are now opting for the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope to reach the Atlantic Ocean. This shift is anticipated to reduce shipping operational efficiency by around 25 percent, placing additional strain on the global supply chain and adversely affecting the worldwide economy (Jenni, 2023). The impact of Houthi attacks is further evident as reportedly over 586 container ships have rerouted around Africa by first half of February, leading to a 82 percent decrease in container tonnage transiting through the Suez Canal since the onset of Houthi attacks. Redirecting ships around the southern tip of Africa in the Indian Ocean is estimated to incur up to an additional \$ 1 million in fuel costs for each round trip between Asia and northern Europe emitting approximately 70 percent more greenhouse gas emissions per trip. (UNCTAD, 2024)

To enhance maritime security in the Red Sea shipping corridor, the United States has lately initiated a multinational security operation code named, "Operation Prosperity Guardian". This operation falls under the purview of Combined Task Forces and is supervised by Task Force-153. U.S. Navy, Royal Navy, and French Navy have successfully intercepted numerous drone and missile strikes by the Houthis yet maintaining this defensive cover is challenging. The deployment of a large number of expensive air-defense and anti-ballistic missiles is unsustainable against continuous attacks by the Houthis using inexpensive and rudimentary drones and missiles. Even targeted strikes by the U.S. and the U.K. against Houthi military assets have not deterred further attacks. The most important takeaway is that in the past; no militant organization has used such long-range and destructive weapons against international shipping on such a scale. Global navies in general and maritime industry in particular were found ill prepared to counter the scale and level of such a formidable threat. This, definitely, will

have far reaching consequences for maritime security and global economy. (Kusovac, 2023)

5. Implications for Pakistan

With a coastline stretching over 1000 kms along the Arabian Sea and proximity to strategic access points to the northern entrance of the Indian Ocean, Pakistan's position is increasingly important in Indian Ocean. The firmly established friendly ties with China, historic relations with United States, and deep seated rivalry with India, Pakistan is also at the epicenter of unfolding great power politics in Indian Ocean. There is hence need to explore available strategic options with a view to safeguard Pakistan's national interests and contribute towards regional strategic stability via sustenance of Balance of Power.

5.1. Threat to CPEC and Gwadar Port

The power competition in Indian Ocean is likely to have profound impact on Pakistan's future objectives. This is particularly true for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and commercial operations of Gwadar port. China's role in the region has been a driving force behind the development of CPEC. It is a stimulus to enhance connectivity and open up new trade routes for Pakistan. The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy that aims to contain China and its influence in the Indian Ocean has brought strategic complications which could impact the smooth functioning of CPEC.

With ambitions to act as net-security provider in Indian Ocean, India has been attempting to disrupt China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Gwadar port project through various means. India has been key abettor of militant groups in Balochistan that work to target and sabotage CPEC projects in Pakistan. RAW has reportedly established a special desk within to design and especially target CPEC in Pakistan. Special funds have been allocated to RAW for the purpose. In several terrorist attacks, Chinese nationals have been targeted by hostile outfits, mostly backed by Indian RAW. Additionally, New Delhi has been employing strong diplomatic means, in conjunction with information warfare, to build international opposition against CPEC and related projects. India has been attempting to propose new connectivity projects as well. This is being done to weaken BRI & CPEC. The most recent example is the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic (IMEC) corridor, to bypass China-led initiatives, including CPEC. These attempts have failed to materialize but they showcase New Delhi's hostility towards CPEC and Gwadar port.

5.2. Quad, AUKUS, and Pakistan

The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and its increasing defense and economic collaboration with India, especially in maritime domain in the shape of Quad, have major concerns for Pakistan. Given Pakistan's geographical location and its proximity to key maritime routes, increased Quad activities may jeopardize Pakistan's maritime interests. The expanded Malabar series of naval exercises are now actively conducted by Quad in

both Indian as well as western Pacific. The aim of these naval maneuvers is to enhance operational capabilities and interoperability amongst navies of member states. India's active participation in the Quad and its pursuit of enhanced naval capabilities may contribute to a more assertive maritime posture, ultimately impacting Pakistan's maritime security calculus.

While the primary focus of AUKUS is Indo-Pacific region, it will also have significant ramifications in the region of Indian Ocean. In addition to the risks of regional nuclear proliferation, AUKUS agreement has the potential to incentivize other nations to acquire nuclear propulsion technologies by exploiting vulnerabilities in nuclear proliferation control regimes. For example, India, a member of the Quad and a signatory to numerous bilateral security agreements with the United States, consistently anticipates a deeper engagement within Washington's Indo-Pacific strategic framework. Leveraging AUKUS as a pretext, India may seek to obtain similar nuclear propulsion technology from a foreign source (possibly France), for its Project 75-A nuclear attack submarine project (SSN). Given the existing collaboration between France and India in submarine development, the prospect of Indo-French cooperation for construction of nuclear attack submarines cannot be dismissed easily.

The potential acquisition of advance nuclear propulsion technology as AUKUS provides, India can significantly augment its nuclear submarine fleet. Historically, Indian Navy operated only one SSN, dubbed Chakra class during Cold War. The nuclear submarine was leased from USSR. Unlike nuclear ballistic submarines (SSBNs), which are meant purely for nuclear deterrence, SSNs are employed in conventional conflict and therefore pose extreme threat to Pakistan Navy. Likewise, another grave concern is improvement in Indian navy's nuclear propulsion technology for its SSBNs which it can acquire with French propulsion technology now available to it. Unlike Australia, which is non-nuclear weapon state, India has nuclear weapons and an active sea-borne nuclear retaliatory program based on its domestic fleet of nuclear ballistic submarines. INS Arihant has also completed its deterrent patrol in recent years. In other words, the ballistic missile submarine is ready for operational deployment. Thus, in case of India, an AUKUS style agreement will result in rapid proliferation of nuclear arms in Indian Ocean. This is not to mention Indo-US nuclear agreement which has previously dented the Non-Proliferation regime (NPT). This allowed India to acquire nuclear fissile material from overseas and spare some local reactors solely for production of weapon grade uranium for its ballistic missile submarines. Such developments compel Pakistan to opt for analogous capabilities to restore Balance of Power. The proliferation of nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean will disrupt the regional balance of power and trigger a naval nuclear arms race. The growing number of nuclear submarines will present substantial challenges in terms of command and control and the safety of nuclear assets in Indian Ocean, which in extreme case, can have global consequences.

5.3. India-U.S. Strategic Agreements and Impact on Pakistan

The strategic agreements between India and the United States have direct impact on Pakistan's strategic calculations. In brief, three such factors can be highlighted. First, the enhance interoperability, availability of high-end equipment, access of advance intelligence, and expansion of logistical network will significantly enhance India's military capabilities, particularly in Indian Ocean. Indian Navy has expanded its fleet of U.S. made cutting edge P-8I Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircrafts (MPAs) which have significantly augmented India's anti-submarine warfare capability (ASW) (Xavier, 2021) besides substantially adding to Maritime Domain Awareness (Situational Awareness). In parallel, India is in process of procuring 24 MH-60 Romeo ASW helicopters (Elizabeth, 2021). Moreover, the materialization of 31 MQ-9C drones from U.S. will expand India's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) outreach in maritime domain (Dinaker, 2023). These procurement and capability enhancement will distort Indo-Pak Balance of Power and intensify Pakistan's security dilemma.

Second, the intensifying defense cooperation between India and the U.S. will degrade Pak-U.S. mutual relationship, particularly in military domain. The United States view India as key player in Indian Ocean for containing China, both through economic and military means. From Washington perspective, a strong Indian navy will be better positioned to counter China, not only in Indian Ocean but in western Pacific as well.

By denying access to high-end U.S. equipment and cutting military aid to Pakistan, Washington seeks to render Pakistan into position where it will no longer be able to challenge India military particularly naval might. This will allow - at least from Washington's perception - India to dedicate majority of Indian military potential against China on land, something in line with U.S. interests.

Third, U.S. support for India's aggressive naval modernization will pose significant threat to Pakistan's national security. India's rapid naval expansion, including the acquisition of aircraft carriers, advanced surface ships, submarines, and naval aircrafts, signify a shift towards a more assertive maritime posture. In addition, Indian plans to develop fleet of nuclear submarines - both SSNs and SSBNs - will introduce new set of complexities and uncertainties in an already fragile Indo-Pak strategic balance. India's pursuit of a robust sea-based nuclear deterrent throws challenges at Pakistan's security calculus and necessitates a reassessment of its own naval capabilities. The nuclear dimension in naval arms race will further heighten the tensions, erode stability whilst increasing the likelihood of inadvertent outbreak of a conflict.

5.4. Blockade of Choke Points and Pakistan Maritime Trade

The employment of rudimentary long-range weapons by non-state actors at sea has raised new set of challenges for maritime security. The new standards in warfare set

by Houthis have showcased that such actors can disrupt maritime activities, particularly at choke points and virtually impose naval blockade. Pakistan is overwhelming dependent on sea-commerce for economic sustenance and majority of its maritime trade transits through Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Any crisis or blockade situation at these crucial maritime nodes will have profound impact on strategic and economic interests of Pakistan. In particular, as a net importer of oil, Pakistan's energy security would be highly vulnerable in the event of disruptions in the supply chain caused by blockades at these straits.

6. Counter-Options for Pakistan

Pakistan has to undertake series of measures to better position itself according to transforming power dynamics in Indian Ocean. By effectively utilizing its strategic position, diplomatic clout, and military prowess, Pakistan can take credible measures to retain regional Balance of Power. The growing complexity and intensification of security challenges in Indian Ocean necessitates robust naval prowess. On one axis, Pakistan Navy must seek enough capability to deter Indian Navy on conventional scale. On other side, Pakistan Navy should be able to counter non-traditional and low-intensity threats to safeguard its maritime routes and preserve sea lines of communications. However, the most important approach will be to effectively employ diplomacy through maritime domain for expansion of its influence and development of robust partnerships with regional and global powers.

6.1. CPEC and Gwadar Port as Strategic Leverage

Strategic diplomacy, centered on CPEC, offers Pakistan an effective tool to strengthen ties with regional countries and major stakeholders in the world. Pakistan can effectively utilize CPEC, to address economic and developmental challenges. Early operationalization of CPEC can be an effective instrument in shaping a balanced power dynamics in the Indian Ocean.

Serving as the linchpin of CPEC, Gwadar port can bolsters Pakistan's strategic position as a key player in regional geopolitical environment. Once fully operational, Gwadar port will act as a strategic node for the maritime transit trade. This will enable Pakistan to diversify its economic activities and reduce dependence on traditional trade routes. The role of Gwadar port in maritime connectivity will bolster economic prospects and alongside contribute to the reduction of India's influence in the Indian Ocean. Development of shipyard at Gwadar alongwith a naval station in close proximity by Pakistan Navy can profoundly enhance Pakistan's strategic relevance in South Asia as well as in Middle Eastern regions.

In addition, full development of Gwadar port could foster diplomatic alliances with key players, creating a counterbalance to India's influence and providing a diplomatic leverage. Once Gwadar becomes a symbol of regional stability, offering economic opportunities and cooperation, it will diminish India's narrative of being the regional hegemon or 'net security provider' as it professes to be. In essence, Gwadar's

multifaceted contributions position Pakistan as a crucial player in reshaping the geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean, countering India's influence and fostering own strategic interests.

6.2. Modernization of Pakistan Navy (PN)

For retaining regional Balance of Power, it's crucial to augment naval prowess of Pakistan. In order to counter aggressive expansion by Indian navy, Pakistan Navy (PN) is now in process of undertaking necessary countermeasures. This involves expansion of naval fleet by induction of new platforms, replacement of older systems with modern high-end systems, and procurement of next generation capabilities at all tiers of naval forces. The roadmap for Pakistan naval modernization has been presented by both former Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi and Admiral Muhammad Amjad Khan Niazi on separate occasions during the past few years.

PN envisions to commission fifty warships which will include twenty major warships in near future. PN has recently procured four Type-054AP frigates from China which have replaced obsolete Tariq class frigates. From Romania, PN has purchased two Yarmook class corvettes while two additional vessels will be commissioned soon. From Turkey, Pakistan is acquiring four Milgem class corvettes - with each pair built in Turkey and Pakistan respectively. All four vessels have been launched. As a follow on project, Pakistan is in process of developing Jinnah class frigates which will be constructed indigenously.

In the realm of underwater forces, Pakistan Navy is currently modernizing its existing Khalid class submarines from Turkey, and is also in process of acquiring eight Hangor class submarines from China. In aerial domain, PN has raised fleet of RAS-72 ASW aircrafts (Dawn, 2023) and is in process of acquiring Sea-Sultan long-range maritime patrol aircraft (Xavier, 2021). In addition, PN is already operating CH-4B combat drones of Chinese origin and is evaluating TB-02 combat drones from Turkey. (Ibrahim, 2022) Beside induction of various platforms, PN is also developing and deploying next generation missile systems featuring improved range, speed, and sensors. For Pakistan, development of credible and effective defensive naval capability is crucial to deter potential aggression from Indian Navy, ensure preservation of national maritime interests and above all Balance of Power for strategic stability.

6.3. Active Diplomatic Engagement through Naval Domain

Pakistan can employ naval diplomacy as a strategic instrument to counter India's expanding geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean by strengthening relations with regional and extra-regional players. Engaging with neighboring countries through regional forums and organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), can foster economic integration and promote collective security measures. Strengthening ties with key international players, including China, Russia, and Middle Eastern countries, can

facilitate Pakistan to overcome the negative fallout from India's growing assertiveness and deepening Indo-U.S. collaboration in Indian Ocean.

Instead of joining certain axis of power, Pakistan can adopt a balanced approach in foreign relations, maintaining friendly ties with the United States as well as China. Mutual co-operation among naval forces can be strengthened through diversification of bilateral and multi-lateral exercises, port visits, and joint patrols. Similarly collaboration in the domain of academia, joint-projects, and technology sharing can deepen Pakistan relation with allied countries. In particular, Pakistan can formulate friendly relation with its South Western neighbor Iran using maritime domain as tool of co-operation. Iran has direct influence in Persian Gulf and exercise dominance over Bab el-Mandeb through Houthis in Western Yemen. By avoiding hostilities and undertaking mutual confidence building measures, Pakistan can significantly minimize vulnerability of its maritime trade transiting through Persian Gulf and Red Sea.

On national scale, Pakistan Navy can further diversify the scope of its multinational AMAN series of exercises to effectively meet the diplomatic requirements of future. Similarly by actively participating in combined task forces, interoperability with foreign navies can be developed to collectively counter shared threats - particularly in non-traditional realm. In essence, naval diplomacy emerges as a multifaceted strategy that allows Pakistan to assert itself as a key player in shaping the maritime dynamics of the Indian Ocean, countering India's influence, and safeguarding its own strategic interests.

7. Conclusion

The intensification of great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean has profound implications for Pakistan. Washington's China containment policy in Indo-Pacific involves development of new alliances and collaborative frameworks like Quad and AUKUS. Similarly, deepening Indo-U.S. strategic co-operation is also a product of growing interests of alliance to counter increasing footprint of China in the Indian Ocean especially CPEC under BRI. India, with ambition of becoming a sole regional hegemon (policeman), is actively projecting itself as net-security provider in Indian Ocean. India's assertive naval modernization is a vivid reflection of these ambitions. These developments, however, are destabilizing as they have intensified regional security dilemmas and triggered naval arms race. Situated at the crossroads of complex geopolitical forces, Pakistan faces both challenges and opportunities. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has the potential to emerge as a linchpin in transforming geopolitical landscape, aligning Pakistan with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative and positioning the country as a key player in maritime trade routes. The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and India's maritime ambitions pose challenges, necessitating a calibrated and adaptive response from Pakistan. The strategic options available to Pakistan encompass a spectrum of diplomatic, sea based nuclear, naval, economic, and security measures, requiring astute decision-making to safeguard national interests and foster

regional stability. It also necessitates a close collaboration with China and PLA navy to ensure Balance of Power in the region.

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