**The Indian Ocean Chessboard**

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“Whoever rules the waves rules the world.”

-Alfred Thayer Mahan

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest water body, with a surface size of 70.56 million kilometres. It comprises 11 hinterland states, and 36 states include its coastal belts. It contains significant choke points like the Cape of Good Hope, Hormuz Strait, Malacca, Bab-al-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. It also connects the world’s four major continents: Asia, Australia, Africa, and Europe.

Therefore, the Indian Ocean’s Geo-strategic, economic, and political importance has ignited competition among major countries, including China, the US, India, Russia, and Pakistan. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been seen as a major centre for global Geo-Politics.

The US and its allies want to contain China’s peaceful Expansion in the Indo-Pacific Region. Moreover, the launch of the China-led Road and Belt Initiative (BRI) and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has materialized the perceived threat from the US. The US is modernizing QUAD in the IOR and working with the littoral states of the ocean, notably India. Additionally, it plans to use a carrot-and-stick approach to persuade Pakistan to join it as an ally in the region’s conflict with China. Since China is a rising power, the US has much at stake in the IOR and is determined to limit China.

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China exports 90 per cent of its Hydrocarbon from the Middle East through the IOR; also, most BRI passes through it, making it essential for China. With growing tensions in the South China Sea and the US threat to China in the Pacific Ocean, notably QUAD, China sought alternate channels through the Indian Ocean. BRI and CPEC will be natural and secure pathways for China’s trade worldwide. Moreover, the BRI has a significant global impact because it connects four major continents: Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. However, a significant limitation for the ambitions of China is that BRI is not a natural part of this region; therefore, China has to strengthen its relations with Pakistan. As a result, China views IOR as the BRI’s main focus, and she wants to stop US tactics against her.

Russia’s “Return to South Asia” alludes to a strong rival in IOR due to its long history and dominance over the IOR against the US during the Cold War. Therefore, Russia is moving into South Asia, focusing on Pakistan and India, for economic and strategic reasons, including arms trading. Russian efforts may lead to disruption of the waves.

India is a coastal state on the Indian Ocean and also a crucial nuclear stakeholder. It regards itself as the undisputed dominant regional force in the Indian Ocean. Because of its geo-strategic position, sovereignty, and territory, the Indian Ocean is referred to as India’s “front yard” by specific marine experts. Additionally, India and the US have cooperated to contain China and Pakistan’s maritime activities in IO. India has launched a nuclear submarine, Arahant, which has gravely jeopardized the atomic configuration of the region. In a word, Indian maritime aspirations in the IOR have the potential to drastically disrupt the region’s tranquil security environment and trigger a catastrophic calamity.

Pakistan, one of the essential coastal states of IOR, shares a 990 km long coastline with the Arabian Sea. Due to its western coast’s proximity to the gulf, it is strategically significant for offering the most direct, secure, and quick sea access to China, Afghanistan, East Asia, Europe, and the Pacific Ocean via Gwadar port. The Indian Ocean also acquired considerably greater relevance for Pakistan owing to BRI and CPEC. Meanwhile, Pakistan may face serious strategic security concerns due to India’s maritime ambitions to contain Pakistan’s influence by undermining CPEC.

Pakistan trades 95% through the Indian Ocean, making it a crucial part of its economy. Through the Arabian Sea, Pakistan primarily imports hydrocarbons and lubricant supplies. Gwadar Port is a Centre for oil and gas pipelines connecting the Central Asian Republics, Middle East, Africa, and Europe through the Suez Canal. Any competition in IOR has the potential to compromise a stable economic environment that directly affects Pakistan or to raise a security threshold. IOR’s peace and stability are, therefore, essential for Pakistan.

Pakistan has significant political ramifications from this core power conflict in IOR. In this sense, if the US-China competition worsens in a particular circumstance, Pakistan will find it challenging to select a side. Geographical and financial links push Pakistan to remain on China’s side. In contrast, Pakistan is under pressure from the US as the IMF and FATF impose institutional limitations on Pakistan.

Pakistan now has a pressing need for a well-equipped and technologically advanced Naval Force. China has to speed up the CPEC and the Gwadar Port completion. Pakistan needs to put more effort into modernizing its naval force and conducting maritime diplomacy.

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