



# INDIA AND THE EU IN THE INDIAN OCEAN MARITIME SECURITY AS CATALYST FOR COOPERATION

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### *The Indian Ocean – An Ocean of Universal Significance*

The Indian Ocean is the third largest of the world's five oceans, stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to the Strait of Malacca. The Indian Ocean connects the Middle East, Africa and East Asia with Europe and the Americas, and it is home to four significant access waterways: The Suez Canal, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, and Strait of Malacca. Nearly half of the world's seaborne trade passes through these waterways and the Indian Ocean; approximately 20 percent of this trade consists of energy related resources. Around 40 percent of the world's offshore oil production has its origin in the Indian Ocean as well as 65 percent of the world's oil and 35 percent of its gas reserves are found in the littoral states of the Ocean.

At present, there are two main sources of insecurity in the Indian Ocean. The first one relates to instability in several of the hinterland and littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Many of these suffer from unstable political conditions, which in turn has given rise to non-conventional security challenges such as illicit trade, piracy, human and drug trafficking, and maritime terrorism. The persistent instability in the Horn of Africa and Middle East has especially increased concerns about the security of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) which form the primary maritime routes between ports. The second source of insecurity relates to the rise of new naval powers in the Indian Ocean— for example China—, essentially leading to a new theatre of great power rivalry. In view of the rise of new major economic and military powers in the Asia-Pacific that rely on energy imports to sustain their economic growth and the vested interests of other major powers in the Indian Ocean region, the Indian Ocean has assumed an almost universal importance and become securitized.

### *India's Traditional Backyards, China's New Playground?*

With regard to India, two extra-regional powers markedly affect India's position within the Indian Ocean region, namely the US and China. For India, this has now resulted in an ongoing and deepening cooperation with the US and a concomitant ongoing competition with China. As regards the latter, the Indian Ocean has begun to play an ever increasing role in Chinese efforts to establish a position as a leading maritime power in the region. This is resulting in Sino-Indian competition for influence in the Indian Ocean. A classic security dilemma between India and China is thus emerging.

India occupies a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean, and unlike other nations in the region with blue water capabilities (such as Australia and South Africa), India lies at the very centre of the Indian Ocean and dominates the SLOC across the ocean in both directions. Crucially, India's economic growth relies on the free flow of goods through the Indian Ocean SLOCs, especially as around 90 percent of India's trade is dependent upon merchant shipping. Given India's growing reliance on imported energy, any disruption of trade flows in the Indian Ocean can have a disastrous impact for Indian economic (and hence societal) stability.

The Indian attitude towards its naval capabilities is thus driven by fears and perceptions of the growing naval prowess of China in the Indian Ocean and existing non-traditional security threats. China's navy is now the third largest in the world behind only the US and Russia and superior to the Indian navy in both qualitative and quantitative terms. China is currently building strategic relationships and

setting up bases along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea and China is constantly acquiring naval facilities along crucial points in the Indian Ocean. This not only serves China's economic interests but also enhances its strategic presence in the region in the long run. In this context, China's so-called "string of pearls" strategy has significantly expanded China's strategic depth in the Indian Ocean.

As a consequence, the Indian navy has dramatically expanded its activities, modernized its fleet and generally raised its profile in the Indian Ocean region through joint exercises, ports visits and disaster relief missions in the recent years. India's "Look East" (and now "Act East") policy has led to naval exercises with Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand. Member states of the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have joined the Indian Navy in policing the Indian Ocean region to check piracy, trafficking and other threats to sea lanes.

The Indian navy commenced counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in 2008. At the same time, India has enhanced its naval engagement with a number of Persian Gulf states, making port calls and conducting exercises with the navies of Bahrain, Djibouti, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as well as engaging with the navies of other major powers in the region such as the US, the UK and France. For India, one crucial challenge has been to match its military hard power presence with diplomatic soft power persuasion especially with regard to the micro-island states in the Indian Ocean and key littoral states around the Indian Ocean Rim. All in all, India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean has grown and India is emerging as an exclusive defence service provider for smaller states with growing economies that seek to strengthen their military capabilities in South-East Asia and West Asia, providing India important access to ports along the Arabian coast, Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

### *The European Union in the Indian Ocean and Regional Multilateralism*

With Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland and Romania, seven of the European Union's (EU) 28 member states are members of the United Nations (UN) Ad-Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean, which was established in 1971 to prevent Great Power rivalry in the Indian Ocean in order to enhance peace and stability in the region. Apart from participating in such a traditional UN forum, the EU and its member states are currently active regarding maritime security in the Indian Ocean in a number of ways, most importantly in counterpiracy efforts against Somalia-based piracy. The latter includes the EU naval mission "Atalanta". The EU also has a strong interest in stability and security in its immediate environment – the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and North Africa – which overlaps with the north-western part of the Indian Ocean region. As a major actor in global trade, the EU relies heavily on the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean, and the EU is especially interested in securing the trade routes for the import and export of goods, as well as protecting European fishing activities in the Indian Ocean.

There is at present no effective mechanism for multilateral cooperation on maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA, formerly IOR-ARC) has an economic rather than security cooperation focus, but despite a membership of 21 Indian Ocean rim countries and having been in existence since 1997, the organization has remained irrelevant.

The most relevant multilateral forum is currently the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an Indian initiative that brings together the naval chiefs of a large number of littoral countries.

### *The Maritime Security Road Ahead*

The parameters of maritime security in the Indian Ocean remain essentially contested among China, India and the United States. With a future three-aircraft carrier fleet, India will maintain and extend its regional superiority in the Indian Ocean. Significant US power will also remain in the region, and in view of the positive Indo-US relationship, the US will support India's position. With regard to the EU, it does have leverage as a major trading partner of China and major security partner of the United States. The non-conventional security challenges are an obvious threat to safe passage. But it is the absence of a comprehensive multilateral agreement on maritime security in the Indian Ocean that poses the greatest hurdle for sustaining trade in the long term. There is no mechanism in the Indian Ocean comparable to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), with annual meetings at the ministerial level that explicitly address maritime security issues and that involve both regional countries and extra-regional major powers.

The so-called US pivot towards Asia has underlined the need for Europe to take on greater responsibility for stabilizing its immediate surroundings, including the Mediterranean and western Indian Ocean littoral states. The EU in its role as a civilian power has always had a strong interest in promoting international law as the basis for maritime governance. It is therefore in the EU's primary interest to focus on a comprehensive multilateral agreement on maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The EU has limited financial and material resources and must opt for policies that will not strain the defence budgets of its member states. Many countries in Asian do not look at the EU as a strong security player, and this provides the EU with room to manoeuvre in initiating a genuine maritime security governance framework. Due to the EU's soft power approach with a focus on international law, the EU – in direct comparison with other maritime powers – may be a highly acceptable partner for many countries in the region to cooperate with, including India. The EU and India together should therefore take the lead as security partners, opening new vistas of cooperation for India and the EU and possibly leading to a soft balancing strategy aimed at hedging Chinese designs.