

## Great Powers Competition in the Indian Ocean and Implications for Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

Due to its crucial geopolitical importance, the Indian Ocean has long been a site of strategic rivalry between powerful nations. This article traces the development of power dynamics from the period of British colonial control to the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, examining the historical background of the Great Power conflict in the Indian Ocean. The British soldiers' retreat "East of Suez" in the late 1960s was a watershed moment that resulted in a rise in US and Soviet naval operations in the area. By the late 1980s, Soviet influence was starting to fade, while the US Navy (USN) increased its presence, especially in reaction to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The changing geopolitical environment of the Indian Ocean region results from the emergence of new actors. With an emphasis on Pakistan, this article critically examines the Indian Ocean's present and possible future players. With its key location and engagement in initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan would likely be affected significantly. The analysis results highlight how crucial historical awareness is to comprehending Pakistan's current obstacles and potential as it navigates this intricate and dynamic geopolitical landscape.

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### INTRODUCTION

During the post-Cold War era, the US emerged as the only uncontested power in the global hierarchy. Still, from 2006 and 2008 onward, China's relative growth in power has led the US's dominance to decline gradually. The US asserts that China is a new strategic rival, supported by several official US papers made public online since 2015 (O'Rourke and Moodie, 2020). The US official uses strategic competition more frequently, which refers to the strategic competition with China (Mazarr et al., 2022). The evidence is available in the Obama Administration of National Military Strategy (NMS) 2015 (Lucas & McInnis, 2015). The Trump administration prioritized excellent power competition in the National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2017 (Weaver, 2018). Another US official document, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2018, echoed the same about China (Mattis, 2018). China poses a significant threat to the US-led global order that was established following the end of World War II, according to US government publications, including the NMS, NSS, and NDS.

The Biden administration's takeover of US affairs has also shown that a new strategic rivalry has developed, with China's ascent posing a significant threat to the US-led international world order (Biden, 2021). Furthermore, to comprehend the reasons behind the US's strategic rivalry with China, experts on US-China relations and the US, in particular, started by discussing the China issue at the start of the twenty-first Century from various angles. While Trump and Biden have promised that their administration will restore US credibility to prevent China from defining the international agenda in the long run, the current state of US policies has demonstrated that it is going through changes and transitions. Essentially, the Obama administration's policies marked the beginning of the US's transition, which their successors carried out. Power Transition Theory (PTT) will be utilized as a theoretical framework to test the hypothesis and examine the competition between the United States and China on a theoretical basis in the current study. PTT has previously addressed the issue of war and peace among major powers in the international hierarchy. According to Organski's original 1958 power transition theory, the most powerful nation in the world at any given time is in charge of a global order that also consists of a few minor nations and dependent countries, a few other major powers, and a few other significant powers of secondary importance (Lai, 2011). South Asia has lately assumed a more significant geostrategic role as a global pivot among major powers and regions against changing global geopolitics. As reliable allies with deep political, military, economic, and cultural links, China and Pakistan are increasing their collaboration to safeguard their respective interests within and beyond the region. China and Pakistan have been treating India as a joint rival, with China acting against India's interests, given the rising strategic leverage between India and the US (Ahmad & Singh, 2017). Amid the strategic rivalry between the US and China, Pakistan's alliance with China has significantly impacted the defense industry, particularly the maritime capabilities

in the Indian Ocean, where CEPC is the BRI's flagship project. The study's causal variables are the strategic rivalry between the US and China and India's improved ties with the US. When China expands Pakistan's defense industry while the US expands India's maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean, the dependent variable changes. According to the hypothesis, Pakistan's ability to become a strategic rival of India is directly impacted by the dynamics of strategic competition, which affects Pakistan's reception of Chinese cooperation in marine security. This article critically explores the current and potential future participants in the Indian Ocean, focusing on Pakistan. Pakistan is expected to be heavily impacted by its strategic location and participation in projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The analysis's findings demonstrate how important it is to understand the past to fully appreciate Pakistan's present challenges and opportunities as it negotiates this complex and dynamic geopolitical environment.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POWER TRANSITION THEORY**

A fundamental paradigm in international affairs, the Power Transition Theory (PTT) offers essential insights into the changing dynamics among major powers and their consequences for world stability (Rauch, 2016). This thesis, which A.F.K. Organski and others developed, asserts that global power's hierarchical structure fundamentally impacts the international system (Tammen, 2008). PTT contends that the relative strength of established powers and emerging competitors, as well as the dynamics between them, determine the stability of the international system. The continuous rivalry between superpowers in the Indian Ocean region and its effects on Pakistan will be examined using this theoretical framework. PTT claims that the balance of power among the central states impacts global stability. The three big powers, China, India, and the United States, have essential responsibilities to play in the framework of the Indian Ocean. Each state's military, economic, and geopolitical interests determine how they behave and impact the region's dynamics. Due to the Indian Ocean's strategic significance, including its location along crucial maritime trade routes and its potential to threaten regional security, it has become a significant theatre for great power conflict. Power Transition Theory (PTT) states that rising nations frequently question the status quo that existing powers have established, raising the possibility of instability and conflict (Lim, 2015). In this regard, China is upending the long-standing supremacy of the United States and its allies with its swiftly developing economy and growing naval might. China's strategic goals in protecting marine routes and fortifying its regional influence are reflected in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's growing naval prowess and strategic emphasis on the Indian Ocean show its aspirations to impose regional influence and thwart China's ascent simultaneously. Strategic alliances and rivalries further complicate the competition between these superpowers. To protect its interests and fend off possible threats, the US has always had a sizable military presence in the Indian Ocean (Chaturvedi, 1998). However, China's expanding influence and India's regional ambitions create a complicated environment where power shifts substantially impact regional stability.

According to the Power Transition Theory (PTT), changes in the balance of power among significant states can significantly impact regional stability and global governance (Lavenex et al., 2021). The ongoing rivalry between superpowers like China, India, and the United States has significant ramifications in the Indian Ocean (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008). First, when governments strive for supremacy, the emergence of new powers and the fall of old ones may spark hostilities. PTT does draw attention to the possibility of cooperation, though, as these countries might try to balance their interests and lower the likelihood of war. This dynamic, which presents opportunities for diplomatic engagement and conflict, is best shown by the contacts between the United States, China, and India in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, it is conceivable that global governance institutions will evolve as the balance of power moves. The rivalry in the Indian Ocean shapes international laws and maritime security policies, shaping how international affairs are handled. This demonstrates the profound effect that changes in power may have on regional and global systems.

Pakistan is prominent in the current excellent power conflict because of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Power Transition Theory (PTT) holds that regional states like Pakistan are directly impacted by the dynamics between great powers in several ways (Burke et al., 2019). Geographically, Pakistan is at the forefront of regional strategic calculations because of its closeness to important sea routes and powerful nations like China and India. Pakistan's diplomatic and security policies are greatly influenced by its alliances and rivalries with these nations. The shifting balances of power in the Indian Ocean bring Pakistan opportunities and risks regarding security. Growing rivalry between superpowers might give rise to security risks, such as possible confrontations or disturbances in commercial pathways. However, these dynamics also allow Pakistan to strengthen its security through military cooperation and strategic alliances. The altering power dynamics impact Pakistan's interests economically, especially in trade routes and investments. Pakistan's efforts to utilize regional dynamics for economic growth and its strategic engagement with growing powers are exemplified by initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Kuszevska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021).

Pakistan can benefit from several strategic recommendations based on the PTT insights. Pakistan should first take an active diplomatic approach with the leading nations to safeguard its interests and reduce security threats. It will improve its standing in the changing regional order by forging stronger diplomatic ties and participating in global

forums. Additionally, Pakistan can manage the challenges of great power competition by forming and sustaining strategic alliances with emerging and incumbent nations. Initiatives for regional cooperation can bolster national security and offer stability. Finally, Pakistan must create long-term plans to strengthen its economic resiliency and national security while balancing its interactions with rival superpowers. As power relations continue to alter, policies must be adjusted to handle security dangers and financial possibilities.

The battle between big powers in the Indian Ocean and its consequences for Pakistan can be better understood with the help of the Power Transition Theory, which offers a strong framework (Hornat, 2016). This theoretical framework examines the power dynamics, security issues, and economic repercussions to shed light on Pakistan's potential and problems within the context of global power transitions. Pakistan's strategic posture and policies will be crucial in determining its future in the Indian Ocean area as the balance of power continues to shift.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Long before the Atlantic gained prominence, the Indian Ocean was a center of trade and cultural interchange, making it an essential part of human history. The growth of this region was greatly aided by the vast migrations and trade networks that connected South Asian countries, especially India, and allowed for the flow of goods, culture, religion, and language. Southeast Asia was impacted by empires such as the Chola, and the Indian Ocean is said to have been a forerunner of globalization. These pre-existing networks were altered by European colonization, leading to the British eventually gaining naval supremacy. Notwithstanding this, Indian laborers and traders continued to be essential, with the "coolie" labor system giving rise to sizable Indian diaspora groups. Although Australia has strong historical ties to the Indian Ocean, these relationships were weakened by post-colonial changes and geopolitical disputes. By the late 19th Century, the Indian Ocean was integral to international shipping routes and global trade, persisting despite disruptions from World War I and II (Davis and Balls, 2019). China has considerably boosted its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, especially in the Arabian Sea, since beginning anti-piracy operations in 2008. In addition to defending Chinese commercial lanes, its development promotes naval diplomacy with neighboring countries. Concerned about the safety of its sea routes for trade, particularly from the Persian Gulf, China has implemented a "place and base" approach as part of the "One Belt, One Road (OBOR)" project. This includes setting up a facility in Djibouti and possible locations connected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), such as Gwadar in Pakistan. These changes point to an increasing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, which would pave the way for future rivalry between China and the United States (Ali, 2019). The Indian Ocean was dominated by the British and French during the early Cold War, and the United States' engagement in it was first restricted. However, as the Cold War deepened, the region's strategic significance increased, prompting a rise in both Soviet and American participation. Fearing the possible deployment of strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) by the US Navy and anti-Western sentiments, the Soviet Union built a sizable naval presence in the late 1960s. The power vacuum that resulted from the British withdrawal "East of Suez" in 1968 was filled by the Soviet Union, which quickly expanded its influence in the northern Arabian Sea and the Horn of Africa. This resulted in increased tensions and a change in US naval strategy, especially following the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This led to the Carter Doctrine, which proclaimed the Persian Gulf a critical US interest. In reaction to these changes, the Soviet Union's naval dominance started to decline, especially during Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985, while the US Navy increased its presence in the Indian Ocean, especially in the 1980s. Soviet naval deployments decreased due to Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost programs, which also shifted the country's focus toward economic reform and international détente. After playing a significant role in the area, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron gradually lost strength and clout until leaving in 1991. With China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean due to programs like "One Belt, One Road" and the establishment of bases in Djibouti and possibly Gwadar, as well as a shift toward a more significant and multi-mission naval presence in the region, this historical context sheds light on current geopolitical dynamics (McDevitt, 2018).

### **The Indian Ocean's geopolitical significance: A critical examination**

With over one-third of all bulk cargo and two-thirds of all oil shipments flowing through its seas, the Indian Ocean is a vital area for international trade. With 33 nations and 2.9 billion inhabitants, this region stretches from Africa's east coast to Australia's west coast. It is a hub for global cooperation in protecting essential rivers and resources. The Indian Ocean Strategic Map highlights the interplay of economic, political, military, and topographical forces that create the region's geopolitical landscape (Grare & Samaan, 2022). A combination of established and emerging nations are involved in the geopolitical dynamics of the area. The region's marine security and geopolitical landscape are significantly shaped by the expanding power of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Russia, even though China's development is widely acknowledged. The Indian Ocean Strategic Map dynamically examines these organizations, considering their military, diplomatic, and commercial links as well as a range of regional issues like geopolitics, fisheries, and climate change.

### **Conventional Participants**

India, the United States, France, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Japan have a long history of political, economic, development, and military contact throughout the Indian Ocean, despite the differences in their distinct agendas and domains of influence.

### **India**

India, the major naval force in the Indian Ocean, has 212 active ports, an extensive coastline, and navigable waterways, all contributing to its strategic importance. To maintain stability and provide security for friends in the region, the Indian Navy is essential. Over the past 20 years, India's maritime focus has grown, reflecting its contemporary strategic view. Robust alliances with island and coastal states like Mauritius show India's dedication to regional cooperation. India imports goods from Australia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates and exports to eighteen other nations. Military cooperation, like the \$50 million agreement with the Maldives, shows India's dedication to improving coast guard capabilities and marine security (Deb & Dutta, 2023). In 2022, the Maritime Rescue Coordination Center was founded following India's SAGAR plan, which aims to enhance security and promote regional development (Baruah et al., 2023).

### ***India: A Passionate Nation by the Coast***

Being the primary nuclear stakeholder coastal state in the Indian Ocean, it regards itself as the natural dominant force in the region. Given its position, sovereignty, and territory, the Indian Ocean is sometimes referred to as India's "front yard" by nautical experts. However, India has always considered the ocean its "backyard." In addition, India and the US are collaborating on marine issues to challenge China and Pakistan. Similarly, it is modernizing its armed forces by introducing aircraft carriers and launching the nuclear submarine Arihant, whose attainment of second-strike nuclear capacity has seriously jeopardized the atomic arrangement of the subcontinent region. In conclusion, Indian maritime ambitions along the Indian Ocean Rim can seriously upset the peaceful security environment in the Indian Ocean region and possibly even precipitate a significant disaster (Pitafi, 2022). India's and the US's common interests have changed significantly over the past 15 years, with the most considerable movement occurring after Narendra Modi came to power in 2016. Bilateral ties have become increasingly important in homeland security, cyberspace, defense, and counterterrorism cooperation. With the visit of former US President Bill Clinton in 2000, bilateral relations entered a new era. President Barack Obama dubbed the partnership a Global Strategic Partnership in 2009. Under Modi's leadership, the focus has expanded to include technology, defense, space programs, and civilian nuclear cooperation. Both countries want India to become a regional powerhouse; the US expects India to expand more quickly than China. The formation of the Indo-US Strategic Partnership is one of the most significant geopolitical developments since the end of the Cold War (Saboor et al., 2022).

### **United States**

It is true that after World War II, the United States increased its presence in the Indian Ocean, solidifying its foothold there throughout the Cold War (Hensel, 2017). The Indian Ocean plays a significant part in US Indo-Pacific policy, even if the western Indian Ocean is not mentioned directly in this plan. The Fifth Fleet of the United States Navy is based in Bahrain and operates under the direction of the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. It also takes part in combined military exercises (Roy-Chaudhury, 1998). Furthermore, Diego Garcia Island still hosts US military personnel. Interestingly, the United States and India are working together more militarily in the more incredible Indian Ocean. The combined drills, intelligence exchange, and educational programs that show a strong alliance further solidify the United States' position as a regional arms supplier. The United States is a major provider to many nations, including Australia, Bahrain, Djibouti, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. With the opening of an embassy in the Maldives and active involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the United States is increasing its diplomatic efforts in the Indo-Pacific region. This is a noteworthy advancement. IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity) is committed to fostering economic ties (Mishra and Dubey, 2024). The United States treaty agreements with Australia and Thailand further highlight the country's strategic importance in the region.

### **France**

French influence in the Indian Ocean dates back to the seventeenth Century, as demonstrated by possessions like the island of Mayotte, which is sandwiched between Madagascar and Mozambique. The fact that Mayotte and Réunion are still French overseas departments demonstrates France's enduring influence in the area (Cole & Cabestan, 2024). France maintains a significant diplomatic presence in Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka as evidence of its commitment to forging regional relationships. Australia's close ties to France and its involvement in the eastern Indian Ocean, particularly the Bay of Bengal, are demonstrated by its 1.6 million French expats. They set aside \$14.3 million for South and West Asia's development budget in 2023–2024, indicating their dedication to bringing medical treatment, humanitarian relief, and economic growth to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Furthermore, their emphasis on trade, regional collaboration, and maritime and catastrophe readiness is shown by their \$36.5 million investment spread over five years in the Northeastern Indian Ocean. With military outposts in Réunion and Mayotte to guard French territory and support regional humanitarian efforts, France and India share a

strategic and maritime alliance. Joint naval exercises have shown their continued collaboration since the 1980s. VARUNA, the yearly combined military air-sea exercise between the nations, was conducted in January 2023 (Purushothaman, 2024). The significance of this exercise has increased since it provides the participating nations' warships with a location to conduct complex training in the western Indian Ocean. In addition, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, and Myanmar are among the top buyers of weapons from France. Facilitated by territories like Réunion, France's large exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which is second only to the United States, is a significant factor in its participation in international organizations such as the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (Lawale and Ahmad, 2021).

### **Australia**

Australia plays a significant role in the Indo-Pacific due to its advantageous geographic location with coastlines on the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Kumar, 2024). Australia is a leader in the region in tackling problems like illicit fishing, climate change, transnational crime, and terrorism because of its long coastline and exhaustive search and rescue area—Australia's strong participation in the Bay of Bengal and the eastern Indian Ocean. In 2023–2024, they allocated a development budget of \$14.3 million for South and West Asia, demonstrating their commitment to providing healthcare, humanitarian aid, and economic recovery to nations such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Furthermore, their emphasis on trade, regional collaboration, and maritime and catastrophe readiness is shown by their \$36.5 million investment spread over five years in the Northeastern Indian Ocean. It's noteworthy how Australia and India's shared security objectives have developed their relationship, leading to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020. The emphasis on defense cooperation, maritime domain awareness, and information and technology sharing highlights the breadth of their engagement. The succeeding Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, signed in 2022, further strengthened this cooperation. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia signed the AUKUS agreement in 2021, demonstrating Australia's commitment to promoting an open and free Indo-Pacific region. It entails committing funds to strengthen Australia's military presence, particularly in the eastern Indian Ocean, and improve its naval capabilities.

### **United Kingdom**

The term "British lake" represented the British Empire's substantial influence in the Indian Ocean before 1945. Although the UK's military role in the region decreased during the early 1970s, it still maintains diplomatic and political connections with the area. The UK's present emphasis on outreach in the Indo-Pacific region highlights its dedication to tackling issues related to maritime security and growing its involvement in the region. Bahrain, Oman, Djibouti, and Singapore are just a few places where the United Kingdom has a significant military presence. Another important overseas territory is the British Indian Ocean Territory, or the Chagos Archipelago, which was created in 1965 and occupied 60 square kilometers of land and 640,000 square kilometers of the Indian Ocean. The strategic significance of Diego Garcia and the joint Royal Navy military operations in the Bay of Bengal are noteworthy. The geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean region dramatically influences the nature of these collaborations and partnerships.

### **Japan**

The Indian Ocean is strategically significant to Japan since it facilitates energy commerce. Japan needs to secure marine channels in the Indian Ocean because much of its seaborne trade depends on this area, mainly when importing crude oil from the Middle East. Japan's history and status as the most significant regional contributor in Asia attest to its considerable significance as a donor of foreign direct investment. The nation prioritizes development assistance initiatives through bilateral agreements concentrating on infrastructure, economic growth, healthcare, and human security. It's admirable that Japan donated \$1.5 million in disaster supplies to Mozambique in March 2023 to aid individuals impacted by landslides and flooding. Japan's commitment to countering piracy in the Horn of Africa is demonstrated by its military presence in the Indian Ocean, mainly through its facility in Djibouti, which has been operational since 2011. Japan's potential for deeper regional engagement and collaboration with like-minded countries is increased by being a member of the Quad.

## **NEW PLAYERS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which controls vital maritime routes and chokepoints, including the Straits of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and Bab el-Mandeb, is essential to international affairs, as Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan noted. The IOR is a hub for global trade and Great Power competition, accounting for more than 30% of all Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) worldwide. These SLOCs connect Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. More than half of the world's oil shipments pass through this region, which has significant container ports and is vital in connecting the energy-rich Middle East with Asia's developing economy. Superpowers like the US, China, India, and Pakistan have deployed conventional and nuclear ships in the IOR, influencing the balance of power due to the region's strategic importance. China and Pakistan are concerned about the strategic balance in the area due to the geopolitical landscape becoming more complex due to the US naval station in Diego Garcia and Indo-US collaboration under the "Asia Pivot" policy. The region's geopolitical dynamics have also been further shaped by developing powers

like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, which have boosted their investments and alliances with IOR countries (Afzaal and Masood, 2023).

### **China**

China has made increasing investments in the area over the past ten years, demonstrating its strategic interest in securing energy resources. The fact that the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca carry around 80% of China's crude oil imports highlights the importance of energy security for its regional engagement (Akram & Fareed, 2019). Despite diversifying its sources, China relies on energy imports from nations like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, and Angola. China has a lot of political and economic power in the Indian Ocean region, given the sheer number of countries signing trade deals and participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. China's strategic orientation in the area is shown by its robust diplomatic network and growing ties with specific nations, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. China demonstrated a flexible policy following its growing economic might by maintaining a more assertive military posture in the region. This strategic combination of military sites and cooperation drills highlights China's commitment to protecting its interests and regional relationships. China seems active in military exercises and international collaboration, particularly in areas like the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf (Vertin, 2019). Furthermore, China appears to be heavily involved in the global arms trade based on the number of countries it has sold weapons to; these countries include Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, Myanmar, Somalia, Tanzania, and Thailand.

### **Russia**

Russia maintained a substantial naval presence in the Indian Ocean and created outposts in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea during the Soviet era. Russia increased its influence in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by engaging in naval drills with Pakistan and Iran and by taking part in the Security Bond exercises with China and Iran in 2023 (Clary, 2022; Hamilton, 2024). Russia also supports security initiatives in Myanmar, Sudan, India, Mozambique, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates, and it holds yearly bilateral drills with India called INDRA. This engagement entails the negotiation of a possible naval base in Sudan as well as the provision of weapons and training. As it continues collaborating with India on defense matters and has recently improved its military and commercial ties with Pakistan, Russia is concentrating on fortifying its connections with both South Asian countries. Russia's goal to balance Sino-U.S. competitiveness and lessen dependency on the US and China is reflected in this strategic change. Russia has modified its position to support Pakistan's security requirements and promote regional integration in recognition of Pakistan's contribution to preserving the balance of power in South Asia. Russia's determination to improve relations with Pakistan despite historical obstacles is demonstrated by its "Greater Eurasia Partnership" initiative and economic cooperation, including trading (Li, 2018).

### **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia's economic growth, fueled by pro-business reforms, has made it a prominent player in the Indian Ocean region. Its focus on energy trade and strategic relationships shows its commitment to securing access to shipping lanes and bolstering regional ties. Remarkably, it is a significant export partner for six countries, including Sudan, Egypt, and Oman, and a considerable import partner for nine, including South Africa and India. Saudi Arabia has focused its assistance efforts in the Middle East, collaborating with Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain (Miller & Cardaun, 2020). While a \$7 million pledge with UNICEF in 2022 was meant to fund educational projects in Yemen, a significant \$800 million investment was made public in March 2023 for Asia and the Middle East development initiatives.

### **Turkey**

The increasing diplomatic and economic influence of Turkey in the Indian Ocean region is noteworthy, particularly in light of initiatives such as the Asia Anew Initiative that place a premium on infrastructure, trade, military, and intercultural exchanges. This implies a purposeful focus on regional cooperation and development. Turkey's deliberate efforts to increase its naval might and cultivate relationships with neighboring countries—such as Bangladesh, Qatar, Somalia, the UAE, and imports of weapons from Pakistan—to engage in arms trade (Potgieter, 2012). These events demonstrate how changeable the geopolitical situation is.

### **Iran**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran has denied the US claim that Tehran struck a chemical tanker in the Indian Ocean, stating that the story is wrong. Additionally, the administration ignored the Houthi rebel conflict in Yemen, which was supported by Iran and targeted ships in the Red Sea, hindering international trade (Colley & Goodman, 2024). The Houthis claim that these attacks are exerting pressure on Israel to stop bombarding Gaza. Speaking on behalf of the ministry, Nasser Kanaani declared that the claims were "completely rejected and worthless" and that they intended to conceal and portray US support for Israel's actions in Gaza. The US launched a strike on the Japanese-owned tanker MV Chem Pluto, which was thought to be "Israel-affiliated," to lay direct blame on Iran (Pedrozo, 2024). Two hundred nautical miles off the coast of India, this was the US's first attempt to pin Iran on a ship beyond the Red Sea. Despite the US accusing Tehran of being "deeply involved" in the Houthi threat, Iran insists it is not coordinating with the Houthis and is not participating in any of the strikes. Iran's deputy foreign minister, Ali Bagheri, praised the local opposition's perseverance. According to the US military, a drone that was fired from Iran collided with a chemical tanker in the Indian Ocean. No casualties were reported after the fire aboard the Chem Pluto was

extinguished. Thus far, Houthi rebels have exclusively targeted Red Sea warships with rockets and drones from outside of Yemen; this is the only instance of its kind that has happened. The United States has publicly accused Iran of deliberately aiming a ship at it, and it has also accused Iran of planning operations to bring down commercial vessels in the Red Sea. If the United States of America and its allies don't put an end to their crimes in Gaza, the Revolutionary Guards of Iran have threatened to close all other waterways except the Red Sea. Two Houthi anti-ship missiles struck the chemical tanker Chem Pluto in the Southern Red Sea, causing structural damage.

The incident took place 200 nautical miles southwest of Veraval in the Indian state of Gujarat. The event happened in a "heightened threat area" for Iranian drones. The Indian navy offered assistance, but the BBC could not verify the incident independently. As per the US Central Command, the USS Laboon cruiser shot down four unmanned aerial drones as it was sailing the region, and two Houthi anti-ship missiles were fired into international maritime lanes. International maritime companies have had to cease operations in the Red Sea due to the increased danger of assaults. The road's safety will be ensured, and the UK government has committed to keeping it from becoming a "no-go area." Foreign Secretary David Cameron called Iran a "malign influence" and insisted on a firm caution not to escalate the situation. UK maritime security company Chris Farrell claims container ships are more likely to reroute than larger boats, creating uncertainty for shipping companies and customers (Chatterjee, 2023).

### **United Arab Emirates**

As shown by its strategic alliances and commercial ties with nations in East Africa and across the Indian Ocean, the UAE actively promotes regional collaboration and development. The UAE's economic success is demonstrated by its being a key import partner for twenty regional countries and a significant export partner for eleven. The UAE, among the top ten oil-producing nations in the world, depends mainly on the thirty percent of its economic output that comes from the export of gas and oil, much of which crosses the Indian Ocean. Amazingly, Collaborative efforts like the memorandum of understanding between the United Arab Emirates and the Seychelles can be constructive in developing institutional capacities and governance infrastructure in the Seychelles (Baruah et al., 2023).

### **Island nations, Island territories, and littoral nations**

Bangladesh, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Kuwait, Myanmar, Mozambique, Malaysia, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Sudan, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Thailand, Tanzania, and Yemen are the twenty-three other littoral nations in the Indian Ocean region. The six island states are Comoros, Madagascar, the Maldives, Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Sri Lanka (Baruah et al., 2023).

### **PAKISTAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE US-CHINA RIVALRY**

The geopolitical competition between the US and China has profound implications for Pakistan's diplomatic strategy, with strategic analysts keenly aware of the delicate balancing act required. Pakistan's relationship with the US is deeply rooted in security, political, and economic interests, with the US serving as its top export market and a preferred destination for the country's elites. On the other hand, China has become an indispensable ally for Pakistan, especially as its primary military supplier and a crucial economic partner through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is central to Pakistan's infrastructure development and economic growth. Pakistani strategists are focused on maintaining a careful balance between these two superpowers, aspiring to reclaim Pakistan's historical role as a bridge state that can mediate tensions and promote regional stability. This approach is essential for ensuring Pakistan's security and economic well-being without becoming dependent on the US or China. During his tenure, former Prime Minister Imran Khan underscored the importance of China in Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly highlighting the significance of CPEC in driving the country's socioeconomic development. In meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Khan reiterated the strong, time-tested strategic partnership between the two nations, emphasizing that Pakistan's foreign policy is increasingly aligned with China due to these unbreakable ties.

Pakistan emphasized in the statement that the Pakistani people support their close friendship with China and that their foreign policy is founded on their ties with China. Islamabad has shown support for China on matters like the South China Sea and the One China Policy, which the West sees as arbitrary measures taken by Beijing to tame its expansionist tendencies. Pakistan has reiterated its "dedication to the One China." policy" and China's backing of, among other things, Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Beijing reaffirmed its commitment to promoting Pakistan's economic development and prosperity while preserving its independence, security, and sovereign rights. According to Imran Khan, the former prime minister of Pakistan, his nation wishes to assist in fostering better ties between the US and China since "another cold war" would be detrimental to all parties involved. An interview with China Global Television was held (APP, 2022).

He shared his thoughts on his historic trip to Beijing to see the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics via the network. During the interview, when asked about Pakistan-China relations with the United States, the Prime Minister said that the world does not want a "second cold war." "The world shouldn't be divided into two parts, neither of which will benefit, to avoid a scenario where the world splits in two. People benefit when nations work

together," he declared. He said, "To be honest, everybody is in danger." The Pakistani delegate responded that his country wanted to play a similar role in the 1970s when it was "essential" to bring the two countries together. He mentioned the previous US Secretary of State's 1971 travel to Beijing and Islamabad when he said, "Dr. Henry Kissinger's historic visit to Islamabad was coordinated by Pakistan (Saboor et al., 2022).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN**

Pakistan is significantly impacted by the competition among large countries in the Indian Ocean, which affects its strategic, economic, and security situation. Pakistan is in a precarious situation as the Indian Ocean has become a major theater for geopolitical struggle, mainly between the US, China, and India (Akbar and Gul, 2023). Pakistan's strategic relevance is enhanced by China's rising naval presence and strategic investments, primarily through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the building of the Gwadar Port, but they also further entangle Pakistan in the US-China competition (Khan, 2022). As a result, Pakistan might feel more pressure to side more strongly with one country than the other, which might strain ties with China or the US, essential to Pakistan's security and economic interests. Moreover, given the long-standing competition between India and Pakistan, India's strategic goals in the Indian Ocean, bolstered by its alliance with the US and other Western powers, may intensify regional tensions (Khan, 2022). To offset India's dominance, Pakistan would feel obliged to fortify its alliances and increase its naval prowess, which might spark an arms competition.

Regarding trade, Pakistan may be able to take advantage of the rivalry in the Indian Ocean. Still, there is a risk that this could draw Pakistan into more significant geopolitical disputes and destabilize the area. Maintaining Pakistan's sovereignty, safeguarding its interests, and preventing itself from becoming a front in the struggle between significant powers would depend on its capacity to handle this complicated environment.

### **CPEC: An infrastructure project with economic and strategic implications for Pakistan**

China sees Pakistan as a crucial ally in balancing India, and their close historical and strategic relationships have developed in response to the dynamics of regional power relations. Having lost in 1971, Pakistan turned to China for strategic support, as the two countries had similar worries regarding India's growing power. This alliance has developed over several years, first in defense cooperation with projects like the construction of the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet and then in considerable economic collaboration with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Javid & Ali, 2024). As a result of this connection, Pakistan is better positioned to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Still, there is also increased worry that the rivalry between the US and China may center on the India-Pakistan dispute, perhaps leading to increased regional tensions (Khan, 2022).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), announced in 2014 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is a fifteen-year investment initiative to address Pakistan's economic and security challenges (Schwemlein, 2022). Extending support until at least 2030, CPEC was seen as a crucial lifeline for Pakistan during strained external relations. The joint strategy, outlined during Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's tenure in 2017, maps the corridor from Kashgar in China to Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, focusing on strengthening economic ties. The master plan envisions three phases: energy and transportation projects by 2020, industrialization for job creation by 2025, and further economic development by 2030 (Ali, 2018). From 2014 to 2019, CPEC projects advanced in alignment with the 2017 master plan, with around \$32 billion in Chinese investments either completed, under construction, or operational, and an additional \$14 billion in projects undergoing feasibility studies. About 70% of the completed projects were in the energy sector, with most of the remainder in transportation. Prime Minister Imran Khan's government, which took office in August 2018, faced challenges related to alleged corruption and unfair contracts from previous administrations. Khan emphasized anti-corruption, reduced loan requests, and sought to increase opportunities for local businesses and access to Chinese technology. Despite inherited economic issues like a balance of payments crisis, fiscal irresponsibility, and a growing trade deficit, Khan's government secured a \$6 billion IMF financing facility in April 2019 while negotiating financial terms with China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Sial et al., 2023).

The scrutiny on CPEC intensified with Pakistan's IMF arrangement, raising concerns about potential Chinese debt traps. The IMF sought assurances from key creditors, including China, to defer or roll over Pakistan's debt, highlighting Pakistan's heavy reliance on its partners. While CPEC brought significant improvements like increased electricity generation and infrastructure enhancements, it also contributed to economic strains exacerbated by reliance on favorable commodity prices. Pakistan's growth peaked at 5.2% in 2018, but structural deficiencies led to projected declines to 3.3% in 2019 and 2.4% in 2020 (Zaidi, et al., 2020). This economic instability poses challenges for Chinese investments, emphasizing the need for reforms aligned with IMF requirements for sustainable growth, revealing the dependency of Chinese projects on Pakistan's economic stability.

China's evolving relationship with Pakistan is interpreted through various narratives: as a "model friendship" for mutual benefit, an effort to "export China's development model," and as part of "strategic competition" in the region, particularly against India. China values Pakistan for its historical ties, including early diplomatic relations and military collaboration, viewing it as a unique and exemplary ally. However, Chinese scholars expressed concerns about



Pakistan's vulnerability to extremism and its potential to become a strategic liability (Small, 2015). CPEC is seen as a means to stabilize and modernize Pakistan, aligning its behavior with China's strategic interests and strengthening China's influence in the region, including counterbalancing India and securing a strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea (Schwemlein, 2019).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has the potential to significantly impact Pakistan's economy, though it brings challenges like external debt repayment. The Long Term Plan (2017-2030) envisions CPEC boosting industry, urbanization, and global competitiveness, with projects like the Karakoram Highway and the Peshawar-Karachi highway contributing to job creation, infrastructure development, and increased tax revenue. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC are key to enhancing economic growth, attracting foreign investment, and expanding market opportunities in sectors like agriculture and manufacturing. Despite financial challenges, Pakistan remains committed to CPEC, anticipating substantial benefits in economic development and industrial expansion (Khan et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Indian Ocean has constantly functioned as a vital arena for the Great Powers' strategic competition, molded by historical and changing geopolitical forces. The region's significance has grown from the British colonial era, the Cold War conflict, and the current US-China competition. A turning point was reached when British forces withdrew strategically, and US and Soviet naval activities grew, establishing the current geopolitical environment. The strategic environment around the Indian Ocean has become increasingly complex in the modern era due to the rise of new players, most notably China. The emerging strategic rivalry between the US and China has grave repercussions for global geopolitics, particularly for South Asia. Pakistan, located in the center of this vibrant region, is at a critical point in its history. Its strategic significance and potential influence on regional and global levels are shown by its participation in critical initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan's strategic positioning and marine capabilities are shaped by the ongoing US-China rivalry, which also plays a role in the larger power struggle. Comprehending the historical background and contemporary power structures is crucial to fully appreciating Pakistan's obstacles and prospects. Pakistan's future course will be primarily determined by its strategic decisions and partnerships while navigating this complex geopolitical landscape. The Great Powers' interactions in the Indian Ocean significantly impact Pakistan's position and influence on the international scene and the region's stability.

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