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The United States and the Indian Ocean Region: A Case of Growing Interests

Lindsay Hughes
Research Analyst
Indian Ocean Research Programme

Key Points

- The United States has a definite strategic approach to the Indian Ocean Region.
- Washington seeks to ensure the free passage of raw materials and manufactured goods, keep watch over the choke points that provide access to the ocean and ensure that its objectives in the region are not impeded.
- These objectives drive its Indian Ocean policy and its relationships with several key actors to a large degree.

Summary

The littoral of the Indian Ocean, the world's third-largest, consists of forty-seven countries. The ocean, which covers around twenty per cent of the globe's surface, also contains several geo-strategically important island groups. It is accessed by nine routes (passages), including five key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that are used mainly to transport energy from the Middle East. The economies of Europe, the power-houses of East Asia and the US also depend upon the Indian Ocean SLOCs for the transportation of raw materials, manufactured goods and raw materials.

The United States has been the de facto security provider for these SLOCs since the 1960s. This situation was an extension of its (also de facto) role as the predominant power in the Middle East, upon which it depended for its energy security. Its vision was limited in the main, however, to the Middle East, no matter that it established at least one base within the Indian Ocean outside of that region. Until 1976, the US Department of Defense divided its responsibility for oversight of the Indian Ocean Region between its Atlantic and Pacific Commands. This construct has been changed to granting oversight of the region to Pacific Command, Central Command and Africa Command, each maintaining responsibility for approximately one-third of the region. (A fourth body, European Command, is responsible for the oversight of the Gulf of Aqaba, among other geographical areas, which provides access to the western reaches of the Indian Ocean. This command will be ignored for reasons of convenience in this paper.) These demarcations do not coincide with those of the Department of State, either, but this, too, will be left unaddressed since it has no real bearing upon this paper.

Analysis

The US has definite objectives in the Indian Ocean region. As one study notes, the United States has:

> Three geostrategic factors, maintaining an open Indian Ocean highway, defending chokepoints at either end of the Indian Ocean and sanitising the Indian Ocean as a secondary front in broader Asian regional competition … the same factors that have animated US policy towards the region for more than a century. That in itself is a useful test of the enduring nature of those particular geostrategic definitions of US interests and a starting point for considering future strategy.

Essentially, the US requires that the Indian Ocean's SLOCs remain free and unencumbered. Additionally, from a strategic point of view, the US remains aware of the importance of the choke points that provide access to the Indian Ocean and, finally, is aware that this ocean could be a theatre of competition between China and India, two of the largest economic and military powers in Asia. This observation highlights the importance of the Indian Ocean SLOCs in distinctly economic terms. The Persian Gulf is the world's major exporter of energy products, virtually all of which are shipped along Indian Ocean SLOCs. China, for example, imported an estimated 7.4 million barrels of oil per day in April 2015 and the US about 7.2 million, marking China's growth as the largest importer of energy products. In 2014, according to another source, China imported around 3.2 million barrels of oil per day from countries such as Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. China, however, is not the only major Asian country that is dependent upon its energy SLOCs to keep its economy moving along. As the chart below shows, other Asian states need to keep their SLOCs secure. (These figures pertain to the countries listed for 2014 and also provide an indication of the importance of the Indian Ocean's energy SLOCs.)

	Units	India	China	Japan	South Korea
Crude Oil					
Consumption	MT*	181	520	197	108
Total Imports	MT	210	372	214	110
Imports from ME & Africa		150	231	174	94
% of Total Imports		71	62	81	85
Natural Gas					
Consumption	BCM*	51	185	112	48
Total Imports	BCM	19	58	120	51
Imports from ME & Africa		18.5	13	45	32
% of Total Imports		97	22	37	63

*MT = Million Tonnes; BCM = Billion Cubic Metres

Sources: BP, 2015; EIA, 2015

While the US is not obliged to maintain the security of these SLOCs, it does so for geostrategic reasons. There is a dawning realisation in Washington that the US economy is not as robust as it used to be. This realisation, when coupled with the rise of China, has forced the US to seek to develop relationships in the Indian Ocean Region in order that it divest some of its security responsibilities in the Indian Ocean but retain its overall importance in it. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, have seen the Pentagon's budgetary demands rise from around US$300 billion to over US$650 billion in 2010. It was in recognition of this fact that Admiral Michael Mullen, ex-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff explained as long ago as 2010 that:

> The most significant threat to our national security is our debt. And the reason I say that is because the ability for our country to resource our military … is going to be directly proportional – over time, not next year or the year after, but over time – to help our economy. That's why it's so important that the economy move in the right direction, because the strength and the support and the resources that our military uses are directly related to the health of our economy over time.

While Mullen drew a direct link between the US economy and its military, there is an indirect link between US foreign policy and the Indian Ocean Region. If the US wishes to continue its strategic priority, which has existed since the end of the Second World War, of ensuring that a hostile competitor does not dominate East Asia, it must take all necessary steps to ensure that the energy SLOCs from the Middle East are under its control. Given its current economic constraints, however, the US will remain unable to create and sustain military facilities, a major element of its security policy previously, within and around the Indian Ocean Region. It becomes imperative, therefore, that the US draw partners and allies who are not inimical to its overall strategies and policies from the Indian Ocean Region and give them the ability to undertake those tasks that it can no longer undertake itself. By this reasoning, countries such as Singapore and India are prime partners and allies, which explains to an extent the reasons for the strong and growing ties between the US and those countries. Essentially then, the US seeks to create a network of formal and informal alliances in the Indian Ocean Region that is sufficiently robust to deter or withstand any actions by competitors to reduce its influence or impede its access to this ocean, just as it seeks to do so elsewhere in the broader Indo-Pacific theatre.

There is, additionally, a second approach to the issue: the so-called neo-Nixon Doctrine. The Nixon Doctrine provided unconditional security guarantees to less powerful allies but required that those who were able to cater to their own defence requirements do so, facilitated by US technical aid and advice. The choice of allies rested upon their relationship with the US; thus, even an autocratic state like pre-1979 Iran was seen as an ally because Reza Shah Pahlavi had close ties to Washington. The neo-Nixon Doctrine, on the other hand, seeks to create a similar relationship with countries that are democratic and economically able to act as security providers in their regions. It is based upon this reasoning that Australia (in addition to the other geo-strategic advantages it offers), India, Indonesia and South Africa become strategically important to US strategy in the Indian Ocean Region.

There are at least four major actors currently in the Indian Ocean Region – the US, China, Japan and India. There are, additionally, a few mid-sized actors, such as Australia, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia. While India is the most strategically situated state of the major players in this ocean, it is China that is currently making the greatest impact upon it. No matter that its immediate interests are concentrated in the East and South China Seas, its growing presence in the Indian Ocean and its deepening relationships with states along its littoral, coupled with its interests and concerns, bring it into direct competition with the objectives of the US. China's objectives are simultaneously defensive and, potentially, offensive.

On the one hand, it is entirely natural that China would wish to secure its energy SLOCs in order to keep its economy moving. To this extent, it is necessary that it position naval ships in the Indian Ocean. It is the establishment of a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean – the naval bases at Djibouti and Gwadar in Pakistan come to mind immediately – that cause the US concern. These bases, moreover, could also have an impact upon the strategic spaces of India and Japan. As a previous FDI *Strategic Analysis Paper* noted, while it is unlikely that China and India, long locked in a strategic rivalry, would go to war, there is little doubt that their competition for influence in the Indian Ocean region will increase, especially as India's

economy grows. Given the US's own competition with China for influence in East Asia, India is seen as a natural ally. This perception deepens when one considers that India's growing economy enables it to fulfil the role of undertaking some of the US's security functions in the Indian Ocean, permitting Washington to concentrate more on the events in East Asia.

The growing perception in Washington that India could admirably fulfil all the functions it seeks in a regional ally has seen a distinct shift in its relationships with that country and Pakistan. Whereas India previously was non-aligned (and remains so, at least officially, today) but leaned towards the then Soviet Union and its successor, Russia, for a variety of reasons, Pakistan has long been a close partner, if not outright ally, of the US. When India and Pakistan fought their various wars since their independence in 1947, Washington invariably came down on the side of Pakistan in word and, often, deed. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and India's turn towards a market economy in the 1990s, that configuration has changed. India has gradually but increasingly become more closely aligned with the US. To an extent it is this growing relationship, coupled with the perception that Pakistan is at least as much an enemy as it is a friend that has caused Washington to withdraw from its previously close military relationship with Islamabad, which was formed over the duration of the Cold War and the "Global War on Terror", although it still provides humanitarian assistance. Pakistan's growing relationship with China has only reinforced India's viability as a partner in Washington's perception.

Iran poses a different challenge to US Indian Ocean policy. Washington has viewed Tehran as a major enemy since 1979. The Obama Administration's semi-turn to Iran with the signing of a nuclear agreement with it recently has re-configured that construct. While domestic opinion on Iran remains divided in the US, Tehran has used the opportunity to re-cast its relations with India, China and Russia. Its relationship with Pakistan continues to remain troubled and its reluctance to fall too far into the Chinese camp has seen it provide strategic opportunities to India. Coupled with these associations is its long-standing rivalry with the major Arab states. The multifaceted challenge for the US is to ensure that Iran does not construct nuclear weapons while simultaneously enabling it to once more become a major energy supplier, ensuring that it becomes neither overly allied with China or Russia nor impedes any efforts that the US may make in Syria, and preventing it from posing a danger to Washington's traditional Arab allies or to Israel, or threatening the energy SLOCs in the Persian Gulf and wider Indian Ocean Region. Above all else, Washington must ensure that Tehran does not pose a threat to the regional objectives of the US.

To conclude, the strategic relationship of the United States with the Indian Ocean Region is predicated upon Washington's desire to achieve its own objectives in the region and beyond. In order to meet those objectives and, in light of its economic situation, it needs to form coalitions with regional powers whose interests are, preferably, aligned with its own but generally not opposed to them. It is this outlook that will add further impetus to its surging relationship with India, see a further deterioration in its relationship with Pakistan and that has the potential to turn a distinctly inimical relationship with Iran into one that is cautiously pragmatic.

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80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au