

Indian Ocean Region: A Strategic Analysis

*Faiza Haseeb**

*Foreign Service of Pakistan, 30th MCMC (diplomatsfp@gmail.com)

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is the new trend in future. The IOR is internationally recognized as a region of growing geopolitical importance, characterized by competition and intense rivalries involving regional and extra-regional/global powers as well as the littoral states. The strategic environment is volatile and recently has been the focus of increasing global attention. The IOR will decide the future of states in these waters. Three major powers i.e. US, China and India, together accounting for nearly half of the global economy, are vying for influence in the IOR. These powers are engaged in rifts to attain naval and maritime supremacy over one another resulting in complex power struggles, which has implications for Pakistan.

Challenges to Pakistan are originating because of power projection of different states in the IOR which are posing a threat to Pakistan's national security. In the given circumstances, Pakistan is not represented in any of the international IOR forums, thus putting Pakistan in a disadvantaged position. Pakistan's non-membership of IORA is an issue of major urgency. As Pakistan's membership will work towards the country's own interests, active diplomacy is needed to approach IORA in a frank manner and devise policy options sooner than later.

Statement of the Problem

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become an internationally accepted key geo-strategic space and a site of intensified power politics between major powers including India, China, and the US. These rival states view the IOR through their own geostrategic frameworks and national interests ensuing rifts to attain naval and maritime supremacy, militarization or at the worst conflicts. Pakistan is a major littoral state in the IOR and has a significant geostrategic presence. This, coupled with its alliance with China, enables Pakistan to co-construct foreign policy in its favour and protect its interests.

However, at this critical juncture, Pakistan is still devoid of a comprehensive policy to pursue the trends in the IOR and to address its isolation at IOR forums, especially Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which is the only Indian Ocean (IO) forum officially supported by the US.

Scope and Significance of Study

The paper would explore the strategic importance of the IOR in general, growing power rivalries of the US, China, and India only and implications for Pakistan. The importance of IORA and the need for Pakistan's membership will be analysed with the aim to highlight the growing need to devise IOR-related policy options for protecting national interest in the region. The issue of varying definitions of the IOR (its areas, countries, sub-regions), in-depth analysis of naval policies of major powers in the IOR, and therivalries/alliances of other extra-regional powers will not be discussed.

Organization of Paper

The paper would first explore the strategic importance and growing power struggles, following which geo-strategic frameworks and national interest of US, China, and India in the IOR would be discussed. Based on this key information, the strategic importance of IOR for Pakistan and IORA's membership would be highlighted leading us to explore various policy options.

Review of Literature

Sufficient literature is available on the IOR focusing on different issues, from the perspectives of major players in the IOR. However, research into IOR vis-à-vis Pakistan, especially on its IORA membership and policy analysis, is scanty. An effort will be made in this study to bridge that existing gap.

Method

Secondary sources data would be analyzed and quoted to support the arguments.

1. Indian Ocean Region – A Key Geo-Strategic Space

IOR¹ is a unique, complex and strategically affluent region of the world because of its geographical location covering the land mass that connects as well as the grand impact that the region makes on the global economies, politics and security at the same time. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is covered with East Africa on the west, India on the north side, Indo-China and Australia on the east and towards the south is South Ocean coast of the Antarctica.

1.1 Strategic Importance of IOR

This strategic and important region is having a strong and significant geopolitical and strategic significance especially with the rise of the rivalries between the littoral states and external powers. The region has witnessed not only its own sets of challenges including ethnic and sectarian tensions, issues of governance but at the same time three powers covering more than half of the global economy are in tug of war with each other including United States of America, China and India.

IOR has its exquisite geographical location which plays important role in the world power politics. The region is important for being at the crossroad of international economy and connecting the major lifelines of trade and Petro deliveries as well as connecting the major and global engines of the world economies from the Asia Pacific to the North Atlantic. IO is considered as hub of globalization as it provides connectivity between east and west.

The strategic importance of IOR for many countries is increasing due to world's geo-economic shift toward Asia, and the related increase in IO trade and investment. The IO, the world's busiest trade corridor, carries two thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo. Approximately 80% of China's, 90% of South Korea's, and 90% of Japan's oil passes through the IO.² According to an estimate, 40 per cent of the world's oil supply and 60 per cent of the oil trade passes in IOR through Straits of Malacca,

¹ For further geographical explanation visit: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xo.html>.

² “China-India Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: Issues for Congress”, CRS Report, 20 April 2018. <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45194.html#fn7>.

Hormuz, and Bab el Mandeb.³ Apart from being a lifeline to trade and economy, the IOR is a huge home to nearly two billion people with diverse background living in densely populated countries. Fishing, offshore oil production, agriculture, mineral resources, zinc, titanium, and many other valuable resources make this region hub of the international trade, strategic engagement at the regional and global scale.

The IO, the world's third largest body of water, has turned into a source of conflict, tension, and stress among regional and non-regional powers. Due to its increased geographical importance, large number of countries as important stakeholders and major powers' claims on the sea, the IOR has gained strategic influence. Apart from the global Petro trade, the IOR also has the strategic importance for P5+1⁴ countries. With few maritime entry points and vast distance between major ports, the IOR creates a huge strategicspace for the concerned powers to exercise their interests and control important choke points like Strait of Malacca. The sensitivity of IOR is highly considerable as any confrontation, disruption or military escalation can harm the global economy within days. Asia has already replaced the west as key energy consumer and energy importer and a source of maritime trade in the IOR.⁵

1.2 Growing Power Struggles and Tripolar Competition

The IOR has been a region of intensifying strategic competition between major powers like the US, China, and India. These powers striving to influence in the IO through increased naval presence which has resultantly intensified rifts, especially between India and China. The IOR has always been a key US national interest, and it views the rise of China as a threat. Therefore, it has active military in the region. India has forged an alliance with the US to gain regional influence. All these states are striving to utilize the opportunities of this region to the fullest and keep freedom of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs).

Chinese naval and military domination in the IOR has also raised serious concerns for the US and India. In order to counter China, India is not only expanding its ties and

³ "World Oil Transit Chokepoints," U.S. Energy Information Administration. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints.

⁴ The P5+1 refers to the UN Security Council's five permanent members (the P5); namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus, Germany.

⁵ Brewster, D. (2016). Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China's New Pathways in the Indian Ocean. *Geopolitics*, 22(2), 269-291.

trade in the region but also militarizing through joint sea exercises and a naval presence in the IOR.⁶

Two unique factors have caused an increase in power struggles in the IOR. Firstly, more than half of the world's armed conflicts have occurred in the IOR, posing a challenge to global and regional security. Secondly, rapid developments are taking place in the IOR such as China-India rivalry, potential confrontation between India and Pakistan, and terrorism, to name a few among others.⁷

Given the commercial and military activities in the IOR, any potential conflict in the region would pose serious security challenges, which would have far-reaching implications for major powers. One such worrisome threat is growing militarization of the IOR as result of perceived threats and challenges such as disruption in trade, inadequate response measures, power projection, and nuclearization in maritime domain, which seriously threaten the stability and freedom of navigation of the IOR.⁸

The IO, being the primary source of sustenance and quality of life for littoral states, has the potential to fuel tensions among littoral and regional states.⁹ Therefore, major powers are engaging in shows of power through naval exercises. For example, Diego Garcia is the US' major geostrategic and logistics support base in the IO, which the US is hesitant to hand over to Mauritius.¹⁰ Similarly, India views the Chinese 'Strings of Pearls' as a threat and is setting a naval base in its surrounding countries so that any Chinese influence can be checked and effectively tackled.¹¹ Increased competition among great powers has given rise to traditional and non-traditional security challenges,¹² therefore, all Asian regional and littoral countries, especially Pakistan, require review and engagement of their policies. In the coming years, the response of the littoral states and other concerned regional powers would be a key factor in shaping the dynamics of power struggle in the IOR. The extra-regional powers are flexing their

⁶ Beenish Ansari, "Indian Ocean Region: A Great Game for Strategic and Nuclear Supremacy", Strategic Foresight for Asia (STRAFASIA), 26 November 2019. <https://strafasia.com/indian-ocean-region-a-great-game-for-strategic-and-nuclear-supremacy/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Beenish Ansari, "Indian Ocean: A Great Game for Strategic and Nuclear Supremacy", South Asian Strategic Stability Institute, 25 November 2019. <http://sassi.org.pk/indian-ocean-a-great-game-for-strategic-and-nuclear-supremacy/>.

¹⁰ Michael McDevitt, "Diego Garcia: An American perspective", The Interpreter, Lowy Institute, 19 May 2020. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/diego-garcia-american-perspective>.

¹¹ Hemant Singh, "How would China's 'String of Pearls Project' affect India's security?", Jagran Josh, 11 March 2020. <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/how-chinas-string-of-pearls-project-would-affect-indias-security-1500355710-1>.

¹² Beenish Ansari, "Indian Ocean: A Great Game for Strategic and Nuclear Supremacy", South Asian Strategic Stability Institute, 25 November 2019. <http://sassi.org.pk/indian-ocean-a-great-game-for-strategic-and-nuclear-supremacy/>.

muscle to have a strong military and maritime hold in the IO, whereas the littoral states are the ones who are actually being affected.

2. Geo-Strategic Frameworks and Great Power Games in IOR

The US, China and India are vying for influence in the IOR. These countries view the region through their own geostrategic frameworks. India is following “Security and Growth for all the Region” (SAGAR) doctrine which is a combination of its Act (or Look) East and the China has the water component of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), called Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The US has framed Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) (also known as the Free and Open Indo Pacific) which is a natural successor to the Asia- Pacific rebalance.¹³

The increasingly crowded surroundings of the IO are influenced by the history, economic and commercial interests, and geostrategic importance of major states in the IOR. Resultantly, US, China, India, and Pakistan have significant divergences in their IOR policy frameworks mainly driven by their different perspectives on security, policies towards China and Middle East and military and non-military foreign policy tools as well as the bilateral relations with each other. The fear of actual or potential friction resulting between these states due to their different IOR policy frameworks can seriously undermine the national strategies of these countries vis-à-vis IOR. As compared to US, China has a more sweeping and integrated IOR strategy, while India has a more disjointed and inward-focused IOR approach.¹⁴

2.1 Strategic Interests of China, India, and US

The major competitors in the IOR are the US, China, and India.¹⁵ India’s strategic importance in the emergent geopolitics of the IOR draws its strength from its size, military power, economic growth, and position near the key sea lanes running from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca.¹⁶ Following ‘SAGAR Doctrine’ in 2015, India re-defined and extended the IOR in 2017 including Gulf of Aden in the West, Burma and Thailand in the East, and Iran in the southwest. India’s IOR strategy is currently undergoing a transformation as it has renewed its focus on developing

¹³ Harry I. Hannah, “The Great Game Moves to Sea: Tripolar Competition in the Indian Ocean Region”, *War on the Rocks*, 1 April 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-great-game-moves-to-sea-tripolar-competition-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ L. Corder, (2010). Rethinking maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region. *Journal of The Indian Ocean Region*, 6(1), 67-85. 10.1080/19480881.2010.489671.

¹⁶ “China-India Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: Issues for Congress”, CRS Report, 20 April 2018.

strategic partnership with the US, which it thinks would increase its influence in South Asia and the IOR in the long run, while Pakistan does not form part of its strategy. India, the largest littoral state in the IOR with a huge coastal line, is a key regional and military power. India-US maritime engagement, according to some analysts, has resulted in China's military modernization.¹⁷

China has a more wide-sweeping view of IOR as it considers South Asia and the IO as an extension of its MSR, the trade and infrastructure corridor linking coastal China to other Asian countries.¹⁸ Thus, for China IOR touches southeast Asia, the IO, Saudi peninsula, and African littoral.¹⁹ Originally drawn by commercial factors, the China's rise in the IOR is now driven by military factors as well. Following the suit of France, US and Japan, China established its first foreign military base in Djibouti in 2017.²⁰ China is asserting herself as a leading regional power through modernization of its navy and defending SLOCs. Unlike India, China considers Pakistan a central element of BRI and CPEC, providing access to it through key land and maritime routes in the IOR.²¹ China has already made substantial investments in Pakistan, including Gwadar Port which clearly reflects Pakistan being essential to China's regional strategy.²² China's 'String of Pearls' strategy is focused on increasing its economic, military, diplomatic and political clout in the IOR.²³ India considers it as a geopolitical agenda reflecting China's hegemonic intentions in the IOR by connecting key routes, SLOCs, and chokepoints and gaining control of the maritime strategic centres of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Somalia.²⁴

The US is one of the strongest non- regional players in the IOR, however, being an extra-regional player, it is dependent on India to pursue its agenda. The US 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' (IPS) is mainly aimed at checking Chinese influence in the IOR, while India is being extended all possible assistance to expand its naval and maritime

¹⁷ Brewster, D. (2016). *Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China's New Pathways in the Indian Ocean*. *Geopolitics*, 22(2), 269-291.

¹⁸ Harry I. Hannah, "The Great Game Moves to Sea: Tripolar Competition in the Indian Ocean Region", *War on the Rocks*, 1 April 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-great-game-moves-to-sea-tripolar-competition-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ David Brewster, "China's new network of Indian Ocean bases", *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 30 January 2018. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinas-new-network-indian-ocean-bases>.

²¹ David Brewster, "China's new network of Indian Ocean bases", *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 30 January 2018. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinas-new-network-indian-ocean-bases>.

²² Harry I. Hannah, "The Great Game Moves to Sea: Tripolar Competition in the Indian Ocean Region", *War on the Rocks*, 1 April 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/the-great-game-moves-to-sea-tripolar-competition-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

²³ Junaid Ashraf, "String of Pearls and China's Emerging Strategic Culture", *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*. https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/10-SS_Junaid_Ashraf_No-4_2017-1.pdf.

²⁴ Ijaz Khalid, Shaukat, Azka Gul, "Indian Response to Chinese String of Pearls Doctrine", *Global Political Review Journal* <https://www.gprjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIoIA2LALJouq9hkR/5NWVYHCk0c.pdf>.

capabilities. However, Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and the African littoral are excluded from its idea of the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). The IOR strategy of the US has evolved into a military-dominant strategy, driven by the need to counter China. The National Defence Authorization Act for Fiscal year 2020 (NDAA 2020) not only further improvised the Indo-US strategic ties in the context of Indo-US framework in the Western IOR (WIOR)²⁵ but also broadened the existing scope of WIO creating a complex situation for existing geographic groupings, including Pakistan²⁶ and an atmosphere of severe military-diplomatic confusion.²⁷ The IOR is all about global geopolitical gambling, in which all the regional and non-regional actors are trying to balance their security and political interests.

2.2 Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan is facing various challenges due to different power projections of major powers in the IOR. Pakistan will need to overcome these challenges to secure its national interests in the IOR. Huge Indian naval deployment and the Indo-US alliance in the IOR has provoked a risky situation for Pakistan as Pakistan will be required to establish a proper security mechanism for OBOR and CPEC. Pakistan has also naval presence in the IO but it is lagging behind India in terms of maritime security.²⁸ To tackle India and secure its interest in the IOR, Pakistan will have to build its naval muscles.

In the aftermath of NDAA 2020, Pakistan is expected to face increased Indian naval aggression as India is considering to take after the US and Chinese model of theaterized commands²⁹ and employ combined military assets in the region to encircle China, which could pose a huge threat to Pakistan's national interests.³⁰ With its diminished

²⁵ According to the UN, the WIO comprises 10 continental and island states: Comoros, France, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania. Dr. David Obura, "Reviving the Western Indian Ocean Economy: Actions for a Sustainable Future", World Wide Fund for Nature International, January 2017. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/13692WWF2.pdf>.

²⁶ Zaki Khalid, "Indo-US Militarisation of Western Indian Ocean – Implications for Pakistan", Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, December 2019. <https://cscr.pk/pdf/perspectives/Indo-US-Militarisation-of-Western-Indian-Ocean-Implications-for-Pakistan.pdf>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Asima Ashraf, "Militarization of Indian Ocean and its implications for Pakistan", Modern Diplomacy, 31 July 2020. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/07/31/militarization-of-indian-ocean-and-its-implications-on-pakistan/>.

²⁹ Brigadier (Dr.) Rajeev Bhutani, "Integrated Theatre Commands for the Indian Armed Forces", Centre for Joint Welfare Studies <https://www.cenjows.in/article-98.html>.

³⁰ Rob Edena, "India Crafts its Own 'Strings of Pearls' to Rival China's Naval Jewels", South China Morning Post, last modified 23 March 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2138327/india-crafts-its-own-string-pearls-rival-chinas-naval-jewels>.

role in the IOR, Pakistan's efforts to counter India as a regional power in the IOR will prove ineffective.³¹

To tackle any potential difficult situation in the IO, Pakistan has no option but to upgrade its naval and maritime capabilities to secure CPEC and deal with current militarization of the IOR. India considers Pakistan-China alliance as a threat; therefore, it is upgrading its naval assets to deal with its rivals.³² However, it is expected that the situation might result in a cold war situation between Pakistan and India, resulting in a high likelihood of an actual confrontation in future. Pakistan needs robust efforts to achieve security in the IOR to safeguard its interests.

3. Pakistan and the Indian Ocean Region

Pakistan is one of the most important country in the IOR. In era of increased competition, Pakistan is facing security and strategic challenges in the IOR. Pakistan is located at the cusp of Arabian Sea in the North. Providing close links to Strait of Hormuz, Pakistan shares around thousands of kilometers coastline with the Arabian Sea which lies in the world third largest ocean. The IOR is the lucrative place for maritime economy which is especially important for a key regional stakeholder-Pakistan. Pakistan is blessed with an important maritime geo-political option. With Afghanistan and Iran on its West, Pakistan provides a shortest possible route between Arabian states and central Asia. To utilize the true potential of the IOR, there is enough space for Pakistan to work in multiple areas. Pakistan is blessed with its unique geographical location but still Pakistan's IO policy seems at a halt. CPEC connects China with Pakistani Gwadar port in the Arabian sea. Pakistan Navy is well-acclaimed regional Navy and is growing with every passing day. In case of China- India rivalry in IOR, Pakistan will be the main factor and Pakistan Navy, the main equalizer.

3.1 Strategic Significance for Pakistan

Pakistan, sharing about one thousand kilometers coastline with the Arabian Sea, lies in the third largest ocean of the world. The IOR – an epicenter of maritime economy –is one of the most mineral rich regions of the world as around 65 percent of world oil reserves and 35 percent of gas reserves are found in littoral states on the strips of the

³¹ Zaki Khalid, "Indo-US Militarisation of Western Indian Ocean – Implications for Pakistan", Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, December 2019. <https://cscr.pk/pdf/perspectives/Indo-US-Militarisation-of-Western-Indian-Ocean-Implications-for-Pakistan.pdf>.

³² Asima Ashraf, "Militarization of Indian Ocean and its implications for Pakistan", Modern Diplomacy, 31 July 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/31/militarization-of-indian-ocean-and-its-implications-on-pakistan/>.

IO which connects Africa and Asia through maritime routes. While South Africa to East Africa lying on its western side, the ocean links the Arabian Sea from north-western side to South of Asia and connects the Strait of Malacca to South East Asia and the South China Sea. The eastern side of the IO is stretched to Western Australia. Thus, the IOR has a vast potential of channelizing trade and bolstering connectivity among littoral states. Pakistan is blessed with an incredibly significant maritime geopolitical position and provides shortest possible routes between Central Asian states and the Arabian Sea with Afghanistan and Iran on its west.³³ Pakistan is one of the important littoral states of IOR. For Pakistan and like many other countries of the Arabian sea, the huge water body of the IO and the passage is the major source of its oil imports and merchandise trade. With changing regional geostrategic situation, Pakistan can play better role to exploit its unique geographical location.

Pakistan is situated at the cusp of the Arabian Sea, close to the Strait of Hormuz.³⁴ For Pakistan, it is a key geo-strategic space in the IOR, however, Pakistan still does not have a comprehensive IO Policy.

Pakistan's partnership with China on CPEC is a key benefit and alliance Pakistan has to its advantage, which however, still needs to be explored to its fullest. Pakistan is mainly relying on CPEC, only on its land elements and not its maritime element. While the importance of CPEC for Pakistan cannot be underestimated, however, at the same time, it is important to realize the importance of the CPEC for Pakistan in creating a holistic foreign policy that includes a deeper strategic consideration of the IOR.

India is religiously following Pannikarian doctrine of 1945, which Pakistan disregarded as a sub-continental strategy. Pakistan does not have a framework to pursue the trends of the IO, especially at a time when the rift between the U.S. and China has shifted to the region. The new great game in the IOR also revolves around BRI, OBOR, and CPEC and involves Pakistan as well, which is an adversary of India and ally of China. This means, Pakistan's adversaries and allies even extend beyond the IOR to extra-regional powers, which have implications for Pakistan.

The offshore balancing strategy being implemented by the US against China and India's self-proclaimed status as Net Security Provider, has implications for Pakistan. India is now expanding its influence in the IOR through military deployment and

³³ Babar Ali Bhatti, "How can Pakistan exploit IOR potential?", Maritime Study Forum, 16 March 2020. <https://www.maritimestudyforum.org/how-can-pakistan-exploit-ior-potential/>.

³⁴ Faiza Farid, "Why Pakistan Needs a Comprehensive Indian Ocean Policy", The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 7 February 2020. <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2020/2/7/why-pakistan-needs-a-comprehensive-indian-ocean-policy>.

diplomacy. This points to the need for Pakistan to level-up its IO game and to find a common ground with the help of its allies for neutralizing the threats and regional growth in the IOR. While India is aggressively following its “Act East, Think West” policy vis-à-vis IOR, Pakistan on the other hand, is exclusively allying with just one country in the region i.e. China and one project i.e. CPEC. This highlights that Pakistan is devoid of any policy that would cater to its relations with East Africa, Mauritius, and Southeast Asian states—any policy that looks south toward developing a coherent, cohesive IO policy.

Due to its historical rivalry with India, Pakistan is trying to ensure active role as a key regional power in terms of naval and military capabilities. Pakistan is in complex security quagmire and is getting closer in the Chinese strategic orbit in the IOR. China's continues support to Pakistan to prevent India from gaining regional hegemony. Increased Chinese maritime containment from the US and its other partners in the IOR has placed Pakistan as the most important and reliable security partner of China in the region.

Pakistan, instead of relying on its alliance with China alone to ensure influence in IOR, will have to switch to maritime security policymaking from a continental perspective. Whether Pakistan accepts it or not, the future of Pakistan's national security is directly affected by the evolving concepts and developments tied to US understanding of the WIO, US persistent patronage to India and the greater perspective of the IOR. The longer Pakistan ignores the necessity of a continental outlook in the region, the more options it will limit for itself. In case IOR is dominated by India, Pakistan's strategic stability paradigm will be disrupted prompting nuclearization of the IOR as well as transfer of high-intensity standoffs and conflicts from land to seas.

3.2 Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Pakistan

The IORA, an inter-government organization, was established in 1997 for strengthening regional cooperation within the IOR. Currently, it has 22 Member States (Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, UAE and Yemen) and 10 Dialogue Partners (China, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Turkey, UK, and USA are current Dialogue Partners).³⁵ The Council of Foreign Ministers is the apex body of IORA which meets annually. The UAE is the current Chair of IORA (2019-2021).³⁶

³⁵ <https://www.iora.int/en/about/dialogue-partners>.

³⁶ <https://www.iora.int/en>.

The organization gained prominence in 2017 after a high-level Summit was held in Jakarta.³⁷

IORA is the only IO forum officially endorsed and supported by the US Free and Open IPS.³⁸ Being non-members, both Pakistan and China are excluded from future multi-national maritime security policymaking in the IO. Pakistan's isolation in the IOR is a sign of the neglect of a cohesive IO policy. Despite having 95% of its total trade through its ports³⁹ and being a primary and third largest littoral state in the IOR, neither Pakistan is a member of the IORA nor it is involved in any of the regional symposiums and forums. Pakistan's inclusion in IORA is important for a South Asia and IOR without India-Pakistan confrontation.⁴⁰

As Pakistan is not represented at IORA either as a member or a Dialogue Partner, the Indian point of view receives undue prominence, while that of Pakistan goes unheard. The issue of Pakistan not being member of IORA has been raised by members several times but the admission of new members to IORA takes place by consensus under the IORA Charter. This implies that a single member can effectively veto the admission of a new member, as India has done on the pretext that in breach of the grouping's principles, Pakistan has not extended MFN status to India. If the matter is to be evaluated from the lens of grant of MFN status to India, then neither the absence of Pakistan from the IORA, nor the IORA's decision, at India's dictate, to deny admission to Pakistan, is in itself a tragedy. The real tragedy is that despite its crucial importance for the security and economic well-being of the country, Pakistan itself has neither been successful in articulating its vision of the IO and IOR nor has the government formulated any policy to counter India's ambition to dominate this ocean. It is hoped that Pakistan's exclusion from the IORA on the IO will finally spur the government into action and drawing attention to this need is the main objective of this research.

Pakistan, a key regional actor in the IOR, has constantly strived to become a member of IORA but had to face a huge strategic setback every time. Pakistan has sent several requests to the IORA secretariat without any fruition so far. The primary reason is its troubled relationship with India, which is a major and founding member of the organisation. As a result, its request to be admitted into the association as a member,

³⁷ "Indian Ocean Rim Association Concludes First-Ever Leaders' Summit", *The Diplomat*, 8 March 2017.

<https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/indian-ocean-rim-association-concludes-first-ever-leaders-summit/>.

³⁸ "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing s Shared Vision", US Department of State, 4 November 2019.

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

³⁹ Faiza Farid, "Why Pakistan Needs a Comprehensive Indian Ocean Policy", *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 7 February 2020. <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2020/2/7/why-pakistan-needs-a-comprehensive-indian-ocean-policy>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

is not even put on the agenda. All countries sharing their shores with the IO can become IORA members, which makes 25 countries as eligible. Except Pakistan, all other such countries are active members of IORA, while Djibouti has never requested to be inducted into the grouping either.⁴¹ Having major stakes in the IOR and being out of the IORA is a big strategic failure for Pakistan which has given uncontested space to rival India as a superior power in the IOR.⁴²

3.3 Policy Options for Pakistan

Pakistan's geostrategic location in the IOR, its alliance with China and key projects like CPEC and Gawadar Port have placed Pakistan as a major maritime power in the IOR. Therefore, Pakistan will require a greater naval presence and maritime security as well as protection of SLOCs and trade in the IOR. For this, it will have to focus on modernizing its naval assets and build related infrastructure.⁴³ Although China will be there to indirectly safeguard Pakistan's interest in the IOR, but in the years ahead when rapid economic activities and rapid militarization in the IOR is expected, Pakistan will have to build its robust IOR policy and upgrade its assets.⁴⁴ Due to geopolitics, there will be an increasing focus on the IO⁴⁵ which will require Pakistan to effectively engage with US, China and India. India, due to fear of Pakistan raising Kashmir issue at a multilateral forum, has till now been blocking Pakistan's entry in elite club of IORA.⁴⁶ It is true that Pakistan has facilitated China's rise in the IOR and is now reaping benefits of its alliance with China, but so is India from its alliance with US.⁴⁷

While mentioning policy options for Pakistan in the IOR, Djibouti's significance cannot be under-estimated as it hosts military bases of US, France, Italy, Japan, and more recently China, all of them being IORA's dialogue partners.⁴⁸ India is also planning to establish its embassy in Djibouti which could be a first step towards establishing its military base. For Pakistan, this could be serious development and

⁴¹ "IORA's Doors Still Shut For Pakistan: Despite Repeated Requests, Islamic Nation Unlikely To Get Membership", *SwarajyaMag*, 10 April 2019. <https://swarajyamag.com/insta/ioras-doors-still-shut-for-pakistan-despite-repeated-requests-islamic-nation-unlikely-to-get-membership>.

⁴² Abid Latif Sindhu, "Pakistan and maritime competition", *Nation*, 30 August 2020. <https://nation.com.pk/30-Aug-2020/pakistan-and-maritime-competition>.

⁴³ Asima Ashraf, "Militarization of Indian Ocean and its Implications on Pakistan", *Modern Diplomacy*, 31 July 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/31/militarization-of-indian-ocean-and-its-implications-on-pakistan/>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Faiza Farid, "Pakistan's Indian Ocean Policy", *Daily Times*, 18 October 2019. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/485010/pakistans-indian-ocean-policy/>.

⁴⁶ Claude Rakisits, "Pakistan's Policy Objectives in the Indian Ocean Region", *Future Directions*, 2 September 2013. <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/pakistan-s-policy-objectives-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

⁴⁷ Maria Bastos, "Pakistan's foreign policy towards the Indian Ocean Region", *Pakistan Politico*, 4 May 2018. <http://pakistanpolitico.com/pakistans-foreign-policy-towards-the-indian-ocean-region/>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

it would need a proactive approach rather than passively sitting back relaxed and watching significant geopolitical moments in the IOR unfolding before her eyes.⁴⁹ To implement the decisions made at “Engage Africa Conference 2019” held in Islamabad, a task force has already been formed at the Foreign Office.⁵⁰ Pakistan should enhance its engagement with African countries.

If Pakistan wants to utilize the IOR potential to its fullest, it will have to work in multiple areas like maritime trade and investment, maritime safety and security, fishery management, science and technology cooperation and tourism, and cultural exchange. Pakistan will also have to benefit from its EEZ for mining, fishing, and exploration.⁵¹ Pakistan may develop the fishery sector by engaging experts⁵² and work for the sustainable development of IO for economic growth and security along its coastline.⁵³

Conclusion

IOR is gaining focus of major powers states like the US, China and India who consider themselves as key players of this region. Pakistan, a major littoral state and a key player, is facing major security, maritime and foreign policy challenges due to rising tripolar competition in the IOR, however, it has failed to construct a comprehensive foreign policy or IO policy as yet. Pakistan’s sole strength in the IOR comes from its strategic alliance with China and CPEC, whose water component is too narrow and focused on Gwadar Port only.

US has formed a strategic alliance with India and has expanded its area of influence in the IOR. China is also playing its cards by military investments, infrastructure projects and security relations with the nearest states and trying to shape out a major role for itself in regional and global affairs, which has consequently contributed to the fears of the US and India.

The two-pronged role of Pakistan, as a connector and as an enabler of China’s presence in the IOR is of immense significance. The rise of Pakistan’s power in the IOR can give a new shape to the power distribution in the IOR. Pakistan needs to aggressively pursue its IOR-related national interests and strengthen its relations with IORA states,

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Islamabad to set up diplomatic missions in six African countries”, Tribune, 5 December 2019. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2112543/islamabad-set-diplomatic-missions-six-african-countries>.

⁵¹ Cdre (R) Dr. Anjum Sarfraz, “Exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and Pakistan’s economic prospects”, Daily Times, 3 October 2019. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/477234/exclusive-economic-zone-eez-and-pakistans-economic-prospects/>.

⁵² Baber Ali Bhatti, “How can Pakistan exploit IOR potential?”, Maritime Study Forum, 16 March 2020. <https://www.maritimestudyforum.org/how-can-pakistan-exploit-ior-potential/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

which would not only likely pave the way for IORA's membership but also give some serious policy re-thinking to the US and India. Pakistan's centrality in the IOR security and foreign policy arena is uncontested and inevitable. It is high time that Pakistan realizes its true potential. The later the realization, the lesser the policy options would be for Pakistan and more complicated the situation would become. Isolation in the IOR is not an option for Pakistan, but only connectedness and deft diplomacy.

Recommendations: The “Masior” Strategy

It is the destiny of Pakistan to play an important role of connectivity in the IOR. Pakistan has been at a critical juncture when it comes to formulating and implementing a well-oriented IO policy. Pakistan's role and isolation in the IOR is a product of the neglect of a cohesive IO policy. Pakistan's key foreign policy objectives in the IOR should be to ensure that relations with the US remain on track, to further deepen relations with China, and to continue to improve bilateral relations with India. To ensure Pakistan's unimpeded access to the IOR, IOR must also be included as a key objective from economic, security and foreign policy point of view as the IO is a critical strategic lifeline and Pakistan cannot afford for this to be threatened. Improvements in bilateral relations with India may also open opportunities for Pakistan to join the IORA.

Although not fully dependent on Pakistan, China's access to the IOR is significantly enabled by Pakistan. The two-pronged role of Pakistan, as a connector and as an enabler of China's presence in the IOR is of immense significance for both countries as it has strongly potentiated China's aspirations to be fully legitimized as a great world power. Together with other key military powers, China is also one of IORA's dialogue partners. Thus, Pakistan should enhance its engagement with China in IOR sphere and work on formulating a comprehensive water component of CPEC, the MSR. It is time that the 'Strings of Pearls' theory publicized by India and its fears in the IOR, become a reality by the rise of Pakistan's power in the IOR. For that, naval and maritime cooperation between Pakistan and China is also crucial and would go a long way. The Foreign Office may call an inter-ministerial meeting of all stakeholders for devising a comprehensive IOR strategy, enhancing the scope of CPEC and formulating a MSR framework. After doing its necessary homework and feasibility studies, Pakistan may then officially approach China to discuss TORs of such collaboration.

The non-membership of IORA is an issue of major urgency for Pakistan. In this backdrop, Pakistan should enhance its bilateral relations with IORA countries as well as other littoral states of the IOR. Pakistan should actively project its keen interest in joining IORA while engaging with these countries. As a first step, Pakistan may

immediately submit a formal request to become an Observer of IORA to the current Chair of IORA UAE. This way Pakistan would be downgrading its request from being a Member to an Observer, but this should be viewed as an important step towards its greater IOR strategy, rather than as viewing Pakistan on its backfoot. Pakistan may also take UAE into confidence and engage in backdoor diplomacy regarding its request. Although, Pakistan would not get benefits equal as that of a full member of IORA, but this will at least ensure that Pakistan is present at an important forum, albeit in a passive way. This will help Pakistan in taking stock of developments happening at IORA, which will ultimately be feeding into its IOR policy formulation. Due to years of inaction and strategic imbalance of its IOR policy, it will definitely take some time and lots of efforts, however, it will be all worth it in the end. The second step, which will be more difficult, would be to apply for a full IORA membership. However, to avoid Indian blocking at IORA, Pakistan would also need to improve its relations with India. The irritants in its bilateral relations with India should in no way be the stumbling block for Pakistan leading to its isolation at important multilateral fora or progressing in spheres other than political.

Pakistan should play its role to neutralize India as possible maritime hegemon in the future. Pakistan should strengthen its strategic ties with China to counter Indian maritime superiority in the future. For this, Pakistan will need to upgrade its navy. Pakistan is getting military equipment from China, Turkey, and Russia. Pakistan may approach these countries for modernization and upgradation of its naval assets. Minimum deterrence and second-strike capability will have to be ensured. The Ministry of Defence may take a lead in this regard. Defence would be an important component of Pakistan's comprehensive IOR policy framework.

Pakistan has not developed meaningful diplomatic relations with African countries and given the crescent importance of the African continent into China's BRI, Pakistan may be criticized to not fully exploit its true potential in the IOR. However, it is encouraging that Pakistan has decided to set up diplomatic missions in six African countries, including Djibouti, on priority basis to improve ties with them. The Foreign Office may immediately engage all stakeholders including Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Defence, Economic Affairs division, Board of Investment, Ministry of Finance, security agencies etc. to discuss various aspects of its enhanced relations with African countries, especially Djibouti, in the follow-up of Engage Africa Conference held by Foreign Office in 2019. After consultation with relevant stakeholders, Pakistan may negotiate further formalities with the South African government and open its diplomatic Mission in Djibouti. Trade and Military attaché's may be appointed while security agencies may open their link office in Djibouti. This will be the first step for

Pakistan towards joining the elite club of countries having their military bases in Djibouti and would definitely put India under extreme pressure.

All the elements/ strategies discussed above may be included in the greater IOR policy framework. An IOR policy framework shall include all components of defence, commercial, economic, maritime, security and investment in short, medium, and long terms in consultation with all stakeholders. This strategy may be named as “Maritime Security and Investment in the Indian Ocean Region Strategy” (MASIOR Strategy), as a counterweight to Indian’s SAGAR Doctrine and US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. This would also require Pakistan to increase maritime ‘awareness and knowledge’ among policy makers, academia, and think-tanks. The rise of Pakistan as key player in the IOR shall begin now.

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