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Maritime Security and Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean: A Realist Analysis of the China–India–United States Triangle

Dr. Khurram Shahzad Siddiqui

Assistant Professor, Department of Strategic Studies, National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad

Email: khurramsiddiqui.edu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving dynamics of maritime security competition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through the lens of classical realist and structural realist theory. It argues that the triangular strategic relationship between China, India, and the United States constitutes the defining axis of twenty-first-century maritime order in the IOR. Drawing on the core realist premises of anarchy, self-help, and the balance of power, the article analyses how each state pursues naval expansion, seeks to control maritime chokepoints, and constructs partnerships calibrated to offset rival power. The article contends that China's maritime assertiveness, driven by the strategic imperative of protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and projecting power beyond its near seas, has catalysed a countervailing alignment between India and the United States that reshapes the strategic geography of the wider Indo-Pacific. While structural pressures toward balancing remain dominant, the article also identifies the countervailing logic of asymmetric interdependence and institutional hedging that complicates a purely conflictual trajectory. The analysis relies on process tracing and qualitative case comparison grounded in primary strategic documents and a systematic engagement with the existing literature. The article concludes that, absent a robust multilateral maritime security architecture, the IOR is likely to remain an arena of persistent great-power competition.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, maritime security, realism, China, India, United States, strategic competition, Indo-Pacific

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean has long been the hub of world commerce, linking the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf to the industrialised economies of East and Southeast Asia, and Europe to the Indo-Pacific region. Some 90% of world trade and two-thirds of world oil shipments pass through its waters at any time.¹ In the second decades of the 21st century, however, this sea has stopped being merely a cradle of commerce; it is also a site of power rivalry between the world's leading powers. The naval build-ups of China and India, the continued forward deployment of the US Navy and the growing contest among powers over the allegiance of the region's maritime states have combined to make the IOR one of the hottest strategic environments of the international system.

The most appropriate way of understanding these developments is in terms of realism. Classical realism in the style of Morgenthau, Carr and Waltz finds the motor of international politics in the structural condition of anarchy, and the irresistible impulse of states to "power maximise".² Offensive realism, as advanced by Mearsheimer, adds that

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010), 9.

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001),



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under anarchy great powers are never satisfied with their level of power, and are in constant competition to dominate their neighbourhood.³ Realism helps to explain why states build large navy forces, why they compete for maritime choke points, and why a new maritime great power will always spark balancing coalitions. In this context, the triangular relationship between China, India and the United States in the IOR is a quintessential example.

This article's argument has three main points. First, China's pursuit of a maritime presence in the Indian Ocean is not only a function of commercial considerations, but is also driven by the structural interests in sea-lane security and power projection, and is a deliberate challenge to maritime status quo underpinned by American naval dominance. Second, India has responded to this challenge both in terms of threat perceptions and a Mahanian urge to gain maritime dominance in an oceanic neighbourhood that New Delhi considers its own, resulting in a cycle of competitive naval modernisation and limited balancing against the United States. Third, the US, in the face of the twin challenges of resource scarcity and a potential peer competitor, has adopted an offshore balancing strategy in the IOR by bolstering strategic alliances with India and regional middle powers - a strategy that, while tactically adaptable, poses its own problems of entrapment and strategic clarity. These three factors combine to create a security dilemma structure that makes the IOR a persistent site of competition in even the absence of war.

2. Theoretical Framework: Realism and the Maritime Arena

In both its structural form and classical forms, realism provides a highly enduring conceptual framework of maritime security competition. The fundamental tenet of structural realism is the belief that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to prioritize security over other objectives, to act as self-help actors and to understand their power in relative but not absolute terms.⁴ These relations are not suspended in the maritime affairs, on the contrary, they are aggravated. There are no natural boundaries in the sea, which can anchor spheres of influence as in the case of the land. Navies are power-projection tools by themselves: they may be seen off the coast of an enemy, block sea-lanes, threaten trade, and demonstrate determination in a manner that cannot be done by land forces. The naval supremacy contest is thus a contest at the same time in economic leverage, strategic signalling and geopolitical prestige.

The offensive realism developed by Mearsheimer is especially enlightening to the current analysis. His thesis is that the international anarchy system provides great powers with very high incentives not only to protect their current status but to optimise their portion of world power, which would grant them regional hegemony in case the situations allow.⁵ His theory portends that China, being an emerging power with growing economic interests, will inevitably demand to turn its economic success into military and naval strength, and will one day rise and challenge the pre-existing regional order, which had been set up under American hegemony. The United States, in its turn, will not yield to this challenge because it is the incumbent hegemon and wants to offshore balance this by accumulating countervailing power, in this case, India, to contain Chinese expansion at the disadvantage of outright conflict.⁶

Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory adds essential nuance.⁷ States balance against threat rather than power as such, and this is an attribute of aggregate power, proximity in

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³ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 29–54.

⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 102–28.

⁵ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 138.

⁶ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 400–02.

⁷ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 22.



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space, offensive power, and aggressive intentions. This sophistication can be used to understand the hedging actions of India: whereas India hedges against China in the naval domain, it also reserves the right to strategic autonomy and does not make any commitments based on the formal alliance, but responds to the perceived threat level. It further contributes to the reason why smaller littoral states in the Indian Ocean pursue a complex multi-vector foreign policy, and which is a balancing between the major powers instead of bandwagoning unconditionally with either of them.

The concept of security dilemma formulated by Robert Jervis is also invaluable.⁸ When a state strengthens its military out of defensive interests, other states will not be assured of such intentions and may react with build-ups of their own, leading to the spiral of insecurity between states. The security dilemma is particularly strident in the maritime arena where there is a notoriously hard-to-define distinction between defensive and offensive capabilities. Beijing describes a Chinese carrier battle group as a defensive resource which it uses to protect SLOCs but the New Delhi and Washington perceive this as a resource based on power projection that can be applied offensively. This is a structural characteristic of maritime competition, and it produces its logic of escalation regardless of whether there is a conscious intent to be aggressive or not.

Lastly, the notion of the command of the commons as proposed by Barry Posen, the capacity to utilize the domain of the sea, the air, and the space and deny it to the opponent, offers a helpful transition between the theory of realism and the empirical analysis to be made.⁹ The United States has traditionally dominated the maritime commons, leveraging this position to maintain a world order that has served American interests. The naval build-up by China specifically threatens this command and India is interested in creating a subservient yet significant regional maritime superiority as a part of the wider commons. IOR is essentially a triangular dynamic of who will exercise command (and who will effectively challenge), this strategic commons, in the decades ahead.

3. Research Methodology

The qualitative approach used in this article is based on two related research strategies: process tracing and structured qualitative comparison. One of the methods such as process tracing is intended to determine the mechanisms and causal routes whereby the theoretical propositions are realized in the real-world. Process tracing in the current analysis helps to trace the flow of the decisions of the naval policy, revision of the doctrine and strategic deployment, which links the structural incentives as postulated by the realist theory to the behaviour of China, India and the United States in the IOR. By doing so, this method enables the article to transcend the correlation between structural conditions and outcomes and show the intervening mechanisms whereby anarchy, power changes, and their perceptions of threats can produce certain maritime strategies.

The strategic postures of the three major powers are analysed in a systematic and parallel way by structured comparison of qualitative content by employing the same set of realist analytical categories threat perception, balancing behaviour, naval modernisation, alliance formation, and chokepoint strategy and each case is dealt with with the same set of analytical categories. This method will help to conduct a strict cross case study and at the same time not to overlook the historically unique aspects of the maritime path of each state. The article is empirically based on four primary and secondary sources. Chinese defence white papers, Indian Maritime Security Strategy and Maritime Doctrine, and the US Indo-Pacific Command strategic communications are examined to determine the proclaimed

⁸ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

⁹ Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (2003): 8.



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strategic goals and doctrinal priorities. The theoretical and empirical scaffolding of the analysis is presented with the help of academic monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles of major publishing houses, such as Routledge, Taylor and Francis, and SAGE. The academic literature is supplemented and contextualised using research outputs of reputable think tanks, amongst them the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the RAND Corporation, and the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace. Lastly, the data of the empirical basis of the assessments of naval power in Sections 5 through 7 is the published data of naval order-of-battle and recorded patterns of deployment.

One of the methodological commitments of the article is that it adheres to a consistent application of realist assumptions as opposed to considering them as conclusions. The article does not assume conflict; instead, it is an experiment on whether the structural incentives of the realist theory are adequate to explain the observed patterns of maritime competition, and it identifies the circumstances that may stabilise cooperative results. This will make the argument truly analytical as opposed to polemical.

4. Geographical Strategy of Indian Ocean

Any attempt to discuss the IOR security seriously has to start with geography because the strategic value of the Indian Ocean cannot be discussed out of a physical context. The ocean is approximately 73.6 million square kilometres across with its western coast along the eastern coast of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern coast along the Strait of Malacca and the Indonesian archipelago, and the southern coast of the subcontinent along the Persian Gulf and the Bay of Bengal. Its northern extremes divide into two strategic bodies, which are critical to it, the Arabian Sea on the western side and the Bay of Bengal on the eastern side, each possessing its unique strategic logic.¹⁰

What makes the ocean strategically important is most of all its chokepoints: the maritime straits of the world trade, which, by their very constricted nature, may be blocked, disputed, or manipulated by the states possessing enough naval strength. The most significant energy chokepoint in the world is the Strait of Hormuz through which nearly twenty per cent of world oil is shipped. The Strait of Malacca linking the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and the Pacific is the busiest commercial shipping path in the world and the sea transporting life of China, Japan and South Korea. Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden) is the entrance to the Suez Canal and, consequently, European markets. The Sunda Strait and the Lombok Strait can be used as alternative routes around Malacca, but are far longer and more expensive. Both of these chokepoints are places of possible strategic advantage, therefore, a point of conflict between naval forces.

Another characteristic of the IOR is the increasing number of important island territories and port facilities, the strategic importance of which is very high in comparison to their geographical sizes. The American military base in the British Indian Ocean Territory, Diego Garcia has long been the logistical base of United States naval operations in the IOR. The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, financed by the Chinese, has become a symbol of the port-access approach of Beijing. The Gwadar port in Pakistan is another Chinese-funded component of the ChinaPakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that promises to provide access to India Ocean to Chinese naval forces. The only Chinese overseas military base is in Djibouti, where it was built in 2017, which qualifies as a qualitative change in Chinese logistics presence in the area.¹¹

In a realist sense geographical positioning of the IOR poses strong structural incentives to

¹⁰ Kaplan, Monsoon, 15.

¹¹ Kaplan, Monsoon, 29.



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naval competition. Those states that rely on maritime trade have to patrol the sea routes or they have to depend on a hegemon which might not be interested in their interests at all times. In the case of China, which relies on Indian Ocean SLOCs to supply most of its energy imports, the strategic need to establish the capability to defend-and potentially even to shut down-these lanes cannot be overridden. The IOR is the natural stage of its great-power ambitions in the case of India, whose peninsular geography and twelve-hundred-kilometre coastline puts the ocean at once a source of vulnerability and a potential seat of power. To the United States, the ability to sustain control over these commons is part of its overall approach of sustaining a favourable balance of power within Asia. These institutional forces all come together on the IOR and lead to the triangular competition discussed in this article.

5. Chinese Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean

5.1 The Strategic Logic of PLAN Expansion

At the very core of Chinese naval expansion lies the structural conflict between the fact that China is the largest trading state in the world and its historical experience as a continental power. The Russian-style Chinese strategic thinking was largely land-boundary oriented and Taiwan contingency in the near seas up to the late 1990s. The continued expansion of the maritime trade in China, especially its reliance on the oil in the Persian Gulf, has essentially shifted strategic priorities to the sea.¹² The Chinese strategists have given the Malacca Dilemma as a name to denote the fragility of relying on one, narrow and possibly blockable strait to get most of the national energy imports. Awareness of this quandary provided a strong push to the debate, which was becoming more and more effective inside the People's Liberation Army Navy and the Central Military Commission, that China must prepare the ability to act, not only in the South China Sea, but also across the entire Indian Ocean.¹³

Holmes and Yoshihara have proven their point that Chinese naval planners have strongly turned to the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the nineteenth-century American theorist who claimed that the ultimate measure of national greatness was maritime strength and control of the sea.¹⁴ Mahanian influence is reflected in the way China is building a blue-water navy that can be sustained in extended-range missions, in its fascination with carrier-strike capability, in its investment in submarine forces as a tool of sea-denial, and in its development of a network of port and logistical partnerships along the Indian Ocean littoral. The infrastructure of prospective naval power projection is what is sometimes called a commercial port-access strategy in realist terms.¹⁵

5.2 *The String of Pearls and the Limits of Commercial Diplomacy*

The concept of the "String of Pearls"—a network of Chinese-financed or -developed port facilities stretching from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean rim—has generated sustained debate among strategic analysts. Critics of the concept argue that it overstates Chinese strategic intent and conflates commercial port investment with naval base development. Proponents, however, contend that even facilities without an immediate military function constitute a logistical latent capacity that can be activated under crisis conditions and that the geographic distribution of these facilities mirrors what a state building an oceanic power-projection capability would be expected to

¹² Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins, "China's Oil Security Pipe Dream: The Reality, and Strategic Consequences, of Seaborne Imports," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 2 (2010): 89.

¹³ Holmes and Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy*, 44–52.

¹⁴ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 15.

¹⁵ Holmes and Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy*, 33.



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do.¹⁶

From a realist perspective, the question of intent matters less than the question of capability. Even if China's port investments are driven primarily by commercial motives—securing energy supplies, supporting Belt and Road Initiative connectivity—their strategic implications are real and are perceived as threatening by other regional powers. India's strategic community, in particular, reads the development of Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti as the encirclement of the subcontinent and has responded with its own counter-access strategies, including developing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, strengthening ties with Mauritius and the Maldives, and building the Sabang base in Indonesia.¹⁷ This pattern of action and counter-action is precisely what realist theory would predict: the security dilemma generates competitive dynamics that are independent of the subjective intentions of the parties.

Erickson and Collins have noted that Chinese naval planners are acutely conscious of the vulnerability of seaborne energy supply chains and that this vulnerability is a powerful driver of both the demand for overseas logistics and the development of an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) posture in the near seas.¹⁸ The PLAN's rapid expansion—which by the early 2020s had produced the world's largest navy by hull count—reflects not merely military ambition but a structural response to the imperatives of maritime commerce and energy security in a world where no single power can be trusted to guarantee access to global sea lanes unconditionally.

6. Indian Maritime Strategy: Between Aspiration and Capability

6.1 The Mahanian Inheritance

India's relationship with the Indian Ocean is, as David Scott has shown, simultaneously geopolitical, historical, and doctrinal.¹⁹ The foundational text for Indian maritime thinking remains K.M. Panikkar's *India and the Indian Ocean* (1945), which argued that Indian history had been shaped decisively by the country's relationship with the sea and that the loss of maritime power under colonialism had been the ultimate cause of subjugation. Panikkar's Mahanian reading of Indian history—his insistence that the ocean bearing India's name must become an Indian lake—has never entirely lost its influence in New Delhi's strategic community, even if its implementation has been constrained by resource limitations and the long institutional dominance of continental security concerns.²⁰

The turn of the twenty-first century brought a decisive shift. India's rapid economic growth, its expanding maritime trade, and the growing visibility of Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean converged to elevate maritime security on the national strategic agenda. India's Maritime Doctrine (2004) and its revised Maritime Security Strategy (2015) both articulate an explicitly expansive vision: a navy capable of operating from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca, exercising sea control in India's primary area of interest (bounded by a line from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca to Australia), and projecting power in its secondary area of interest encompassing the broader Indian Ocean.²¹

6.2 Naval Modernisation and the China Factor

Harsh Pant has observed that India's maritime ambitions have historically outpaced its

¹⁶Vijay Sakhuja, *Asian Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Transactions China, India and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2011), 85.

¹⁷Harsh V. Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch between Ambitions and Capabilities," *Pacific Affairs* 82, no. 2 (2009): 282.

¹⁸Erickson and Collins, "China's Oil Security Pipe Dream," 93–100.

¹⁹David Scott, "India's 'Grand Strategy' for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions," *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, no. 2 (2006): 98.

²⁰Scott, "India's 'Grand Strategy'," 106–14.

²¹Scott, "India's 'Grand Strategy'," 120.



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capabilities, and that this mismatch has produced a strategic posture that is simultaneously assertive in rhetoric and cautious in practice.²² The Chinese challenge has, however, begun to alter this calculus. The rapid growth of PLAN capabilities in the Indian Ocean—including submarine deployments, surface task force exercises, and the establishment of the Djibouti base—has created what India perceives as an encirclement threat requiring a serious operational response rather than merely declaratory policy.

India's naval modernisation programme has accelerated correspondingly. The commissioning of INS Vikrant (2022), India's first domestically constructed aircraft carrier, marked a milestone in the development of a genuine blue-water capability. The expansion of the Indian submarine fleet, the development of the Andaman and Nicobar Command as a strategic pivot for monitoring the eastern Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca, and India's growing participation in multilateral maritime exercises with the United States, Australia, and Japan all reflect the structural logic of competitive balancing.²³

David Brewster has argued that India aspires to be the dominant power in the Indian Ocean but faces a fundamental tension between its desire for strategic autonomy and the material imperatives that push it toward partnership with the United States.²⁴ This tension reflects a classic realist dilemma: the state that balances internally must bear the full costs of its own security; the state that balances externally through alliances gains capability but surrenders a degree of strategic independence. India's preferred posture—deep security cooperation with Washington without formal alliance commitments—attempts to navigate this dilemma, but it leaves open the question of how far the partnership can be relied upon in a genuine crisis.

6.3 The Neighbourhood as a Strategic Battleground

India's maritime strategy is complicated by the structural geography of its neighbourhood. Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Myanmar are all courted simultaneously by Beijing and New Delhi, and the domestic politics of these small states regularly produce diplomatic reversals that undermine India's influence. China's financing of major infrastructure projects in these countries—through the Belt and Road Initiative—gives Beijing economic leverage that translates into political influence, even if it does not immediately produce naval access.²⁵ India's counterstrategy has emphasised development assistance, security partnerships, and maritime domain awareness cooperation, but it is constrained by fiscal limitations and the turbulence of South Asian politics. The result is a competitive subregional dynamic in which India's claim to natural leadership of the Indian Ocean littoral is continuously contested.

7. United States Strategic Posture in the Indian Ocean

7.1 Command of the Commons and Its Challenges

The United States has exercised effective command of the Indian Ocean commons since the British withdrawal from east of Suez in the late 1960s. The combination of Diego Garcia, the Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain, a rotating presence at Djibouti, and extensive access arrangements with littoral states from Kenya to the Philippines has underpinned a maritime order in which American naval supremacy was effectively uncontested.²⁶ This order has served American strategic interests by enabling the free flow of oil from the

²²Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean," 286.

²³David Brewster, *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 37.

²⁴Brewster, *India's Ocean*, 61–79.

²⁵Sakhuja, *Asian Maritime Power*, 102–18.

²⁶Posen, "Command of the Commons," 27–34.



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Persian Gulf, supporting military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and guaranteeing the sea lanes through which American allies in East Asia sustain their economic growth. Posen describes command of the commons as the foundation of the United States' global military reach, and the Indian Ocean component of this command has been integral to American grand strategy since the Carter Doctrine of 1980.²⁷

China's naval expansion, however, is beginning to complicate this command. The PLAN's growing submarine force—capable of sustained Indian Ocean patrols—its development of carrier capability, and its logistics infrastructure in Djibouti represent the emergence of a credible alternative naval presence that American planners must account for. More fundamentally, China's A2/AD capabilities in the near seas threaten the survivability of American carrier battle groups in the western Pacific and thereby impose costs on the United States' capacity to reinforce its Indian Ocean presence in a crisis.

7.2 The Indo-US Strategic Partnership

The United States' strategic response to the China challenge in the IOR has been built around the deepening of its strategic partnership with India. The logic is straightforward in realist terms: by building up India as a regional balancing power, Washington can impose costs on China's maritime expansion without committing American forces to direct confrontation.²⁸ The partnership has been operationalised through a series of foundational agreements—GSOMIA (2002), LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020)—that have progressively aligned the logistics, communications, and intelligence capabilities of the two navies. The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which brings together the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, has emerged as the pre-eminent multilateral expression of this strategy, conducting regular naval exercises (Malabar) and coordinating maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific.²⁹

C. Raja Mohan has characterised the India–US relationship as an evolving natural partnership between the world's two largest democracies that is, nonetheless, constrained by India's deep-rooted preference for strategic autonomy.³⁰ The autonomy preference reflects not merely strategic calculation but a historical identity forged in the Non-Aligned Movement and sustained by the political culture of an independent great power. American policymakers have, at times, found this preference frustrating; but it is, from a realist perspective, entirely rational. An India too closely identified with American strategic objectives would lose its capacity to maintain relationships with Iran, Russia, and other states whose cooperation is important to Indian interests, and would risk being drawn into American confrontations that do not directly serve Indian strategic goals.³¹

7.3 Resource Constraints and Strategic Prioritisation

A third dimension of the American strategic posture in the IOR is the tension between the scope of strategic commitments and the availability of resources. The United States faces a classic strategic overextension problem: the demands of the western Pacific, the European theatre, and the Middle East compete for finite defence resources, and the Indian Ocean, while strategically important, is not the theatre in which American forward presence is most directly contested. The "rebalance to Asia" announced by the Obama administration in 2011—subsequently relabelled the "Indo-Pacific strategy" under later administrations—reflected an attempt to reprioritise American strategic attention

²⁷Posen, "Command of the Commons," 22.

²⁸Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, 263.

²⁹C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan*, 52–69.

³⁰C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 18.

³¹Mohan, *Samudra Manthan*, 105–12.



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eastward, but the practical reallocation of naval assets has been slower and more contested than the rhetoric implied. This structural resource constraint reinforces the logic of offshore balancing through India and other regional partners rather than direct American assumption of maritime policing responsibilities across the vast IOR.³²

8. Triangular Dynamics: Security Dilemma, Balancing, and Convergence

8.1 The Security Dilemma in the Maritime Domain

The interaction of Chinese expansion, Indian response, and American repositioning in the IOR exhibits the classic features of the security dilemma: each state's effort to improve its security produces countermeasures by others, generating a competitive spiral that is difficult to arrest without credible reassurance mechanisms.³³ China's port development along the Indian Ocean rim is described by Beijing as a commercial initiative; India and the United States receive it as a strategic encirclement. India's Andaman and Nicobar Command and its base access arrangements in the region are characterised by New Delhi as defensive measures; China reads them as part of an emerging containment architecture. American naval exercises with India, Japan, and Australia are framed as expressions of a rules-based maritime order; China interprets them as exercises in strategic encirclement. None of these readings is straightforwardly false, and none is entirely complete. The security dilemma operates precisely by making benign and malign interpretations of the same actions simultaneously available.

8.2 Patterns of Balancing

The dominant balancing pattern in the IOR is a soft coalition between the United States, India, Australia, and Japan directed against Chinese maritime expansion. This coalition lacks the formal treaty obligations of NATO, operates through exercises and intelligence sharing rather than permanent basing arrangements (with limited exceptions), and is held together by shared threat perception rather than a common institutional identity.³⁴ Walt's balance of threat theory predicts precisely this kind of informal balancing coalition: states that perceive a common threat but are cautious about the entrapment risks of formal alliance will construct flexible, deniable, and reversible partnerships that preserve strategic manoeuvrability.³⁵

India's position in this emerging coalition is structurally pivotal but strategically ambiguous. As the IOR's largest resident power and the state with the greatest material stake in its maritime order, India has both the strongest incentive and the greatest capacity to contest Chinese maritime expansion. Yet India's preference for autonomy, its continued economic interdependence with China, and its management of a land-border dispute that requires diplomatic channels to Beijing all constrain the depth of its alignment with Washington.³⁶ This ambiguity makes India a less reliable partner than American strategists would prefer, but it also makes India a more effective regional actor, since its credibility as an independent pole is part of what gives its diplomatic initiatives value.

8.3 Points of Strategic Convergence

Despite the dominant competitive logic, the three major powers share certain interests in the IOR that create limited but real opportunities for strategic convergence. The suppression of piracy—exemplified by coordinated operations in the Gulf of Aden—has brought Chinese, Indian, and American naval assets into effective if informal collaboration. Counter-narcotics operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

³²Kaplan, Monsoon, 145.

³³Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," 200.

³⁴Brewster, India's Ocean, 140.

³⁵Walt, Origins of Alliances, 147–80.

³⁶Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean," 293.



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(HADR) have similarly created functional working relationships at the operational level. Maritime domain awareness (MDA)—the shared mapping of vessel movements, suspicious activities, and potential threats—is an area where all three states benefit from information sharing, even if they are reluctant to formalise such arrangements.³⁷

These functional convergences do not eliminate strategic competition, and realism would not expect them to. The command of the commons is not divisible in the way that functional cooperation on specific tasks might suggest. But they do indicate that the IOR will not become a zone of permanent military antagonism in the near term, and they create diplomatic channels and working-level relationships that may reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation. The challenge of maritime governance in the IOR is, in essence, the challenge of institutionalising these functional convergences sufficiently to provide stability without resolving the underlying structural competition that generates them.³⁸

9. Multilateral Maritime Governance: Prospects and Limitations

The structural imperatives of great-power competition do not, in and of themselves, preclude multilateral governance of the maritime commons. The history of maritime law—from the 1958 Geneva Conventions to UNCLOS (1982)—demonstrates that states with competitive interests can agree on rules governing behaviour at sea when the costs of non-cooperation exceed the costs of agreement. The question for the IOR is whether the present configuration of interests is susceptible to governance arrangements that can reduce the risk of conflict without resolving the underlying power competition.³⁹

The existing institutional architecture of IOR governance is thin. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), established in 1997, provides a multilateral forum for twenty-three member states, but its mandate is economic rather than security-oriented, and its deliberative processes are too slow and its membership too heterogeneous to serve as a vehicle for managing great-power competition. The Western Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), established under Indian initiative in 2008, has built professional networks among regional navies, but it lacks enforcement mechanisms and is subject to the political constraints that afflict any multilateral body that includes states with competing interests.⁴⁰

The deeper obstacle to robust multilateral maritime governance in the IOR is structural: the three major powers have conflicting interests in the design of any governance framework. The United States favours a rules-based maritime order that endorses the freedom of navigation principles enshrined in UNCLOS and, not coincidentally, that legitimises the American naval presence and freedom of manoeuvre that underpins its strategic position. China seeks a governance framework that recognises its growing regional interests without institutionalising a balance of power weighted against it. India seeks arrangements that entrench its regional leadership role without committing it to either American strategic objectives or Chinese-dominated multilateralism. These structural tensions make comprehensive governance frameworks difficult to achieve, and realism would suggest that any institutional arrangement that emerges will reflect the underlying distribution of power rather than transcend it.⁴¹

Nonetheless, partial and functional governance arrangements—on issues such as maritime domain awareness, piracy suppression, environmental regulation, and maritime search and rescue—remain achievable and valuable. Sakhuja has observed that the shared interest of

³⁷Sakhuja, *Asian Maritime Power*, 175.

³⁸Holmes and Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy*, 90.

³⁹Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 126.

⁴⁰Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 371.

⁴¹Scott, "India's 'Grand Strategy'," 128.



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IOR states in stable sea lanes creates a genuine, if limited, foundation for maritime cooperation that can be built upon through patient diplomatic engagement.⁴² The development of such arrangements would not resolve the structural competition between the major powers, but it could reduce the risk of miscalculation and provide a diplomatic infrastructure that might, under more favourable political conditions, be extended to more sensitive security issues.

10. Conclusion: The IOR in the Age of Strategic Competition

The Indian Ocean Region stands at the intersection of the most consequential structural forces shaping the twenty-first-century international order: the rise of China as a maritime power, the emergence of India as a regional great power with expansive oceanic ambitions, and the effort of the United States to manage the relative decline of its positional advantages without surrendering the fundamental features of the maritime order it has underwritten. Realist theory illuminates these dynamics with considerable precision. The anarchic structure of the international system, the logic of self-help, the dynamics of the security dilemma, and the mechanics of coalition balancing all find clear expression in the triangular strategic competition examined in this article.

The central argument advanced here—that China's maritime expansion constitutes a structural challenge to American maritime hegemony in the IOR, that India's response is shaped by both realist balancing imperatives and Mahanian aspirations, and that the United States is adapting through an offshore balancing strategy built around the India partnership—is supported by the doctrinal evidence, the deployment patterns, and the institutional alignments examined across the preceding sections. These dynamics do not portend imminent armed conflict. The nuclear deterrent relationships among the three powers, their extensive economic interdependence, and the functional cooperative arrangements that persist despite political competition all constitute real brakes on escalation.⁴³

What they do portend is a protracted condition of maritime strategic competition in which each power will continue to invest in naval capabilities, contest influence over the region's littoral states, and seek to shape the institutional and normative environment of maritime governance to its advantage. The IOR will remain an arena where the structural logic of great-power rivalry expresses itself through the deployment of ships, the signing of access agreements, the financing of ports, and the construction of coalitions.⁴⁴ This is not a pathological outcome; it is a predictable consequence of the structural condition of anarchy operating on a region of surpassing strategic importance.

Two policy implications follow from this analysis. First, the development of robust, resilient institutional architecture for maritime governance in the IOR—building on functional cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness, piracy suppression, and HADR—is both possible and desirable, even within the constraints of structural competition. Such architecture will not resolve the underlying competition, but it can reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation and preserve channels of communication that may prove invaluable in crisis. Second, India's strategic posture—combining internal balancing through naval modernisation with selective external balancing through the Quad and bilateral US partnership, while preserving strategic autonomy—is, on realist terms, a rational and potentially stabilising approach to its structural environment. Whether India can sustain the will and the resources to execute this posture consistently over the long term is the central strategic question for the IOR in the decades ahead.

⁴²Sakhuja, *Asian Maritime Power*, 210.

⁴³Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 234–35.

⁴⁴Kaplan, *Monsoon*, 202.



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Future research should attend to the evolving role of middle powers—Australia, France, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia—in shaping IOR strategic dynamics, and to the impact of climate change on the region's maritime geography and security agenda. The theoretical framework employed here, while powerful, can also be productively supplemented by constructivist analysis of the identity narratives—the idea of "India's Ocean," China's maritime heritage discourses, and the American "rules-based order" framing—that shape how these structural imperatives are perceived and communicated. The IOR is not merely an arena of material competition; it is also a space in which rival conceptions of legitimate maritime order are contested, and understanding those contests requires analytical tools that realism alone cannot supply.

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