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# US Influence in the Indian Ocean Region

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Today, US policies in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), viewed within the larger framework of unipolarity now in its second decade, assume importance, as the status quo is likely to prevail in the foreseeable future. Washington's influence in the region flows from its preponderance as a political, economic, social and power. The Indian Ocean waters gained importance after entry into force of Laws of the Seas in 1994, which makes the interests of nation-states increasingly identify with freedom of navigation and ocean resources. These waters also assume relevance following 9/11 because it supports the movement of jihadi terrorists from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Asia-Pacific region, besides the transportation of global oil supplies across the globe.

Considering the US sponsored Proliferation Security Initiative which involves maritime interdiction of suspect ships involved in transportation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) material brings the Indian Ocean waters into sharp focus. Instances of maritime interdiction relate to the seizure of a North Korean ship, *Ku Wol San*, in 1999 at the Kandla port, carrying missile components and related blueprints to West Asia and Pakistan. Similarly, the interception of another ship, *So San*, in 2002 by joint US-Spanish efforts while carrying Scud missiles from North Korea to Yemen, and the *BBC China* carrying centrifuge parts to Libya. These non-military threats associated with the Indian Ocean waters make it important from a US security perspective

The US focus from a global threat during the Cold War years has shifted to one of regional challenges and opportunities in the region. US policies are all about engagement and balance of power in the IOR. More specifically, the US attempts to balance China through the politics of cooperation. Otherwise,

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Washington also seeks to obtain a stronghold in the Persian Gulf, Malacca Strait as well as beyond the Indian Ocean in the Pacific region with the help of Japan, India and Australia and other littoral states. For instance, the US Navy's rescue and relief efforts in Thailand and Sri Lanka during the tsunami suggest its strong non-military humanitarian role and project its friendly face in the IOR. In a sense, US interests in the IOR have not undergone any major change in the post-Cold War period. Washington's interests existed even prior to the entry of the former Soviet Union into the area. In hindsight, it appears the US grew into the successor state of the British Empire in the context of the Indian Ocean. The US inherited the interests of Great Britain and developed a commonality with them in the post-World War II period.

Otherwise, US short-term interests in the region are clearly to cope with Iran and China. The nebulous nuclear status of Iran worries Washington. Moreover, with China seeking a larger footprint in South Asia, a new "great game" has started to take shape in the IOR. China is determined to enhance military and economic cooperation with the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Beijing also aims to establish a naval base at Marao in the Maldives; besides, it has an oil exploration business in Sri Lanka which reinforces the strategic significance of the region.

## **Background**

The IOR comprises 47 countries, which share the coastal waters of the Indian Ocean. The IOR comprises the Central Indian Ocean where Diego Garcia is situated; the Western Indian Ocean that comprises the littoral nations of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Kenya and Pakistan; the Eastern Indian Ocean with Singapore, Thailand and Australia. The Indian Ocean includes the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Strait of Malacca, Great Australian Bight, Gulf of Oman, Mozambique Channel, and other tributary water bodies. The Indian Ocean as a body of water between Africa, Asia, Australia, and Antarctica assumes importance as a trade link between the Mediterranean and the Pacific Ocean.

The IOR is a critical geo-strategic space of competitive naval deployments that features the presence of extra-regional naval forces. During the pre-1945 period, the IOR was referred to as a "British Lake" with colonial bases. During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States developed only a peripheral interest in the region. Following the exit of the British Royal Navy from the East of Suez in 1970, the region witnessed strong superpower interest, resulting in the United States and the former Soviet naval presence in the region: for instance, the classic

case of the USS Enterprise which sailed into the Bay of Bengal in December 1971 towards the concluding phase of the India-Pakistan War over the liberation of Bangladesh.

Surprisingly, the US Navy (USN) does not have a separate Fleet Command for the Indian Ocean – like the two Fleet Commands for the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans – warships of the Pacific Fleet Command (the Seventh Fleet) and the USN Forces Europe (the Sixth Fleet) operate in the area. However, when deploying in the Indian Ocean, these warships come under the jurisdiction and command of an independent fleet – the Fifth Fleet. Interestingly, the US Navy is the only dominant non-Asian Navy operating in the Indian Ocean waters.

During the Cold War, the Nixon Doctrine that highlighted that the US Navy's real function in the Indian Ocean is to be stationed at the "water's edge" with a preference for an "island strategy" remains relevant even today. One of the most important aspects of the 1969 Nixon Doctrine was a search for allies to act as regional gendarmes in the IOR to defend Western interests and prevent the emergence of crises that might place pressures on the US to deploy her own military forces in the region. However, with the fall of the Shah of Iran, who amounted to a gendarme and the Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Nixon Doctrine lost relevance and the Carter Doctrine took shape.

The Carter Doctrine of January 1980 formalises US influence in the IOR. The doctrine states: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the US and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." President Jimmy Carter created the Rapid Deployment Force to intervene in the Persian Gulf following the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979.

The Pentagon has historically maintained considerable naval/military assets in several strategically located states of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, especially the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. During the Cold War, the primary US objective was to have the political and military capability to influence events in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The USN and Joint Chiefs of Staff since the early 1960s sought to construct a major military base on Diego Garcia to defend and expand uncontested Western authority in the Indian Ocean. The aim of US military power projection in the IOR was to deter indigenous

revolutionary activities that threaten to break the West's economic and political hold over the littoral states. Most of the IOR states have aid, trade and investment linkages with the US.

This is due to US and Western dependence on the region for hydrocarbon resources, trade and security linkage. US peace-time military diplomacy has long been one of the essential constituents of its foreign policy and an effective methodology, to foster bilateral and regional relationships. Military training cooperation is an essential component of military diplomacy and has helped to build close ties with other nations. Such cooperation also helps to strengthen strategic security relationships and address common security concerns.

### **US Strategic Interests**

US economic interests in the region are oil wealth and transportation routes, minerals and ocean wealth in the long-term, besides trade and shipping. Another aspect is control of Chinese and Russian access to West Asian oil resources. Washington's political objectives are to curb the influence of Iran, support Saudi Arabia, with a compliant policy towards US oil giants, besides support to Pakistan against Afghanistan and, by proxy, curbing Russian influence in the region.

US military objectives in the region would be to use the ocean as a launch pad for missile strikes against Afghanistan. Another major interest of the US with its military-industrial-economic (MIC) driven economy is to excel in the arms trade with IOR littoral nations and military diplomacy to achieve these objectives. Also, US maritime security interests would involve control of shipping through the Malacca Strait.

US forces required for deployment in any Gulf crisis cannot be based there given the intra-regional political divisions over the need for an overt American military presence. Also, the unwillingness of regional states to provide Washington facilities to station military forces highlights the need for maritime superiority in the IOR. Therefore, the offensive capability of USN forces, sea-based tactical air superiority and at sea sustainability of the fleet prove relevant in terms of flexible deployments. For instance, the USN's carrier strike groups that figure in the Central Command's scenarios for American military intervention against Iran would, therefore, be stationed "over the horizon" in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, at shifting locations that are generally closer to New Delhi and Karachi rather than to Abadan.

Clearly, a major US worry in the IOR is Africa owing to the security of oil supplies. At present, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for more than 15 percent of US oil supplies, a share expected to rise to 25 percent by 2015, according to the US National Intelligence Council. Nigeria – the continent’s leading producer that accounts for about 10 percent of current US oil imports – like other leading African producers such as Angola, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Congo, is located in the Gulf of Guinea.

For the US, Africa is an alternative source of energy supply to the Middle East, but the region remains largely unstable. In 2006 alone, insurgents seeking local control over Nigeria’s oil resources – most of which come from the Niger Delta region – have cut the country’s exports by more than a quarter. With US companies such as ExxonMobil and Chevron pumping nearly half of Nigeria’s oil, the country’s southern oil region is widely seen as a likely target of US military intervention.

China has also stepped up an aggressive effort to secure raw material supplies, particularly oil, from African producers who traditionally supplied the West. Visits to Africa by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2006 and earlier this year have been aimed at forging new cooperation ties, creating new businesses and markets for Chinese companies and their products. Therefore, from an energy security perspective, US influence is essential in the IOR, to be able to project power in the African continent.

For the US Navy during peace-time, surveillance is a major military activity to track movements of hostile naval forces in the region. This led to a chain of US stations in the IOR at Mahe and Bacoa in the Seychelles, and Northwest Gap, Pine Gap and Nurrungar in Australia. All these stations are for communications, observation, satellite tracking and “space research.” Otherwise, US military power projection in the region aims to deter indigenous revolutionary activities that threaten to break the West’s economic and political hold over the littoral states as most of them have aid, trade and investment linkages with the US.

## **Concluding Observations**

The IOR is an area of geo-economic and geo-strategic significance owing to the enormous energy and natural resources of the region which drive its significance. Besides, the impact of globalisation in the post-Cold War period has potential for further regional economic development. Also, the IOR is witness to emergent power rivalries, power transitions and growing asymmetric conflicts. There are also the geo-energy stakes in the adjoining West Asian and Central Asian Region.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the American attempt at regime change in Iraq through use of force have ushered in a new era, that marks the end of the post-Cold War period leading to the “post-post-Cold War period” in terms of the militarised approach to US foreign policy implementation. This explains why the USN, without a separate Fleet Command for the Indian Ocean – like the two Fleet Commands for the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans – is the only dominant non-Asian navy operating in the Indian Ocean waters.

The maritime space of the IOR has undergone a transformation following the 9/11 terrorist attack and the 2003 US-led war on Iraq. At the peak of operations during the US-led War on Terror, over 100 warships, submarines and support vessels were deployed in the North Arabian Sea. Today, the maritime dynamics in the IOR are premised on force postures of the extra-regional navies deployed for tasks of regional power projection, challenging violent non-state actors, securing geo-energy reserves and security of energy supply chains. The strategic significance of the IOR is evident from the emergent missions, new doctrines and technologies that extra-regional naval forces showcase.

The reality of US influence in the Indian Ocean Region is clear from the USN air strikes against targets in Afghanistan and Iraq during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom in recent years. These missile attacks demonstrate the USN’s ability to exercise military power against littoral states deep inland from the sea, as well as its capability to maintain a forward deployment of its aero-naval forces far away from their home bases in the US.