

**E content for
M. A. Geography IV Semester
Political Geography**

India and the Emerging Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean of the world and covers nearly 20% of water surface. The Indian Ocean Region can be roughly identified as follows:

Its western border is continental Africa to a longitude of 20° E, where it stretches south from Cape Agulhas; its northern border is continental Asia from Suez to the Malay Peninsula; in the east it incorporates Singapore, the Indonesian archipelago, Australia to longitude 147° E and Tasmania; while in the south it stretches to latitude 60° S as determined per the Antarctic Treaty of 1959.

The region has 51 coastal and landlocked states, namely 26 Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) states, five Red Sea states, four Persian Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, France, Britain and 13 landlocked states.

Four critically important access waterways are the Suez Canal (Egypt), Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen), Strait of Hormuz (Iran Oman), and Strait of Malacca (Indonesia-Malaysia).

major seaports are: Chennai (Madras, India); Colombo (Sri Lanka); Durban (South Africa); Jakarta (Indonesia); Kolkata (Calcutta, India); Melbourne (Australia); Mumbai (Bombay, India); Richards Bay (South Africa).

Reasons behind the increased importance of Indian Ocean Region

Indian Ocean countries have a long history of trade, culture and military interaction with the rest of the world. Today the Indian Ocean's traditional status as an international trade highway is more significant than ever before, while international military presence in the ocean is unprecedented.

1. The region contains 1/3 of the world's population, 25% of its landmass, 40% of the world's oil and gas reserves.
2. A major concern of India in the Indian Ocean is energy. India is almost 70 per cent dependent on oil import, major part of which comes from gulf region.
3. The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are considered among the most strategically important in the world. More than 80 % of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 % passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 % through the Strait of Malacca and 8 % through the Bab elMandab Strait.
4. The Indian Ocean is an area of conflict. Some conflicts are internal and remain localised, but other local and regional conflicts are of global significance and are prone to foreign political and

military interference. Some notable conflict areas are Israel and Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

5. Though the causes of these conflicts vary, many can be associated with weak or failed states, significant levels of poverty, poorly developed institutions, the absence of democracy, corruption, competition for scarce resources, interference by foreign powers, the global war on terror and what can be termed 'turbulence' in the Islamic world.

6. The region is home to continually evolving strategic developments including the competing rises of China and India, potential nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamist terrorism, growing incidence of piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, and management of diminishing fishery resources.

7. Almost all the world's major powers have deployed substantial military forces in the Indian Ocean region. The US 5th Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, and uses the island of Diego Garcia as a major air naval base and logistics hub for its Indian Ocean operations. France maintain a significant presence in the north and southwest Indian Ocean quadrants, with naval bases in Djibouti, Reunion, and Abu Dhabi.

8. The region is rich in energy resources and minerals such as gold, tin, uranium, cobalt, nickel, aluminium and cadmium, and also contains abundant fishing resources.

9. Roughly 55 per cent of known oil reserves and 40 per cent of gas reserves are in the Indian Ocean region. The Gulf and Arab states produce around 21 per cent of the world's oil, with daily crude exports of up to 17,262 million barrels representing about 43 per cent of international exports.

10. The Indian Ocean has some of the world's most important choke points, notably the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and the Bab el Mandeb. As these choke points are strategically important for global trade and energy flow, a number of extra-regional states maintain a naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

11. Although the number of reported incidents of piracy have dropped dramatically in 2012, the International Maritime Bureau continues to report the territorial waters of littoral states and offshore waters as high risk for piracy and armed robbery against ships, particularly in the Gulf of Aden, along the east coast of Africa and the Strait of Malacca.

12. China's aggressive soft power diplomacy has widely been seen as arguably the most important element in shaping the Indian Ocean strategic environment, transforming the entire region's dynamics. By providing large loans on generous repayment terms, investing in major infrastructure projects such as the building of roads, dams, ports, power plants, and railways, and offering military assistance and political support in the UN Security Council through its veto powers, China has secured considerable goodwill and influence among countries in the Indian Ocean region.

13. The increased significance of Indian Ocean Region in the world geopolitics is one of the reasons behind the "Pivot to Asia" policy of the Obama Administration. The pivot is meant to be

a strategic "rebalancing" of U.S. interests from Europe and the Middle East toward Asia and Pacific.

Significance of Indian Ocean for India

The Indian Ocean encompasses about one-fifth of the world's sea area and the Indian Peninsula extends two thousand kilometres into the sea, bringing approximately 50 percent of the Indian Ocean within a 1000-mile arc ascribed from Indian Territory. This provides for a dominant position for India in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Its national and economic interests are inseparably linked up with Indian Ocean.

Indian occupies a central and strategic location in the Indian Ocean area. Its national and economic interests are inseparably linked up with Indian Ocean. Hence to keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of Peace free from superpower rivalry and increasing cooperation among littoral countries in the region has always been India's foreign Policy's goal for example Look East policy, Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, BIMSTECK and Ganga-Mekong Cooperation etc.

Apart from this Indian Ocean has an important role to play in keeping the moderate climate of the Southern India. Along with strategic importance. Indian Ocean is the only fishing ground for coastal fisherman is India. Due to huge marine recourses it spreads prosperity in coastal plains of India.

The regional strategic environment is volatile and dangerous.

In addition to some of the conditions enumerated above, recent developments in Iraq and Afghanistan now pose additional challenges of violence, terrorism, and instability across the entire Indian Ocean region. A Malaysian conference participant, for example, argued that the foregoing conflicts have been bad for Malaysia and have "played into the hands of local terrorists." For these reasons and others, the region - - an "insecurity community" - - has been an arena of increased diplomatic and military activity on the part of a variety of littoral states as well as external powers in last few years.

Military power, including weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles, is looming larger in the region.

Conference participants pointed to the ongoing insertion of military power in the region by the United States and - - to a much lesser extent - - Japan. At the same time, it was emphasized that India, Malaysia and a variety of other littoral states are strengthening their militaries. We also will see "a resurgent Iranian naval capability eventually." Moreover, many of these states are emphasizing power projection capabilities, often through the acquisition of more advanced military hardware and the construction of new bases intended for forward defense. For example, one Indian participant claimed that India's relatively new Andaman and Nicobar Command - - which New Delhi almost decided to name "Southeast Asia Command" - - is intended to "stop the Chinese east of the Malacca Strait."

Quite a few conference participants underscored the growing role of nuclear weapons in the region. The Israeli scholar pointed to Israel's growing emphasis on strategic reach and on the development of a maritime second-strike nuclear capability with respect to both the Indian Ocean - - to deal with Iranian and Pakistani contingencies - - and the Mediterranean. The Indians, similarly, emphasized their intention to develop a full triad of nuclear weapons capabilities to include, in the words of one scholar, "high yield nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean."

India's objectives in the Indian Ocean Region

1. To spread its influence across the entire Indian Ocean Region, through trade and investment, diplomacy and strategic partnerships
2. Upgrading relations with Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia; regions that hold mineral deposits and energy reserves critical to India's economic development and great power aspirations
3. Positioning itself to emerge as the dominant Indian Ocean power in the decades ahead
4. Ensuring that China does not gain a significant strategic foothold in the region
5. Strengthening influence and control over Indian Ocean choke points through security relationships with key littoral states such as Singapore, Mauritius and Oman

India imports about 70% of its oil through the Indian Ocean Region to its various ports. 90% of India's international trade by volume is dependent on sea. India has been enhancing its strategic influence through the use of soft power, by becoming a major foreign investor in regional mining, oil, gas and infrastructure projects.

India remains concerned about the role of external powers (or some of them) in the Indian Ocean region.

Most of this concern relates to China and - - to a lesser extent, the United States. On the other hand, some conference participants - - to include some Indian participants - - believe that key littoral countries like India, Pakistan, Iran, and Malaysia have gained substantial space and strategic autonomy because of the desire of external powers to forge alliances and coalitions in the region. One Indian, moreover, commented: "asking outside powers to stay away is a pipedream."

The Indians present also seemed comfortable with, and appreciative of, Israel's expanding security perimeter and its growing strategic involvement in the Indian Ocean region. The Indians present welcomed the evolving Indo-Israeli security nexus and were pleased by a presentation by an Israeli scholar, which placed India and Israel in a common democratic and civilizational community. Similarly, one Indian - - referring to Moscow's recent naval foray into the Indian Ocean - - stated: "India is pleased that Russia is back in the Indian Ocean."

The region is characterized by growing strategic competition involving both external powers and the littoral states.

In this regard, most conference participants emphasized the continuing rivalry between India and China, the "peer powers of Asia," and the potential for this problem to worsen. The Indians at this conference were especially vocal and alarmed about Beijing's evolving role in the Indian Ocean region. One Indian, for example, asserted that the 21st century would be the "template for Sino-Indian rivalry." Pointing to Chinese proliferation of WMD, provision of conventional arms to various South Asian states, "ruthless subordination of its neighbors", "special relationships" with Pakistan and Burma, "growing presence of the PLA" in areas adjacent to India's borders, and developing naval capabilities, most of the Indians present made it clear that China, in their view, is India's number one security problem. Commenting on India's insertion of naval forces into the South China Sea last year, one Indian said it was a "good thing if China felt threatened by our exercise. We intended to send a message and they got the message."

The Chinese scholar present strongly countered these assertions and argued that Chinese strategy in the Indian Ocean is benign and has three dimensions: trade and development, good neighborliness and friendship, and security and cooperation. In his view, China has re-oriented its overall security strategy since the end of the Cold War, but India has not done so. He argued that China is no longer preoccupied by fears that other states are "encircling" China, but Indian national security strategists remain fixated on fears of encirclement of India.

Some of the Americans at the conference also attempted to calm Indian fears, arguing, for example, that China's security strategy is oriented mainly east, not south. The Indians generally reacted to such interventions with skepticism. In addition, on the matter of Burma, one conference participant argued that fears about Chinese influence in Burma are overdrawn and it is not Beijing, but Rangoon, that holds the "whip hand" in the China-Burma relationship.

Paralleling this concern with China, there also is some Indian worry about the growing role of the United States and, to a lesser extent, Japan in the region.

At the extreme, one Indian argued strongly for the need for Indian military - - and nuclear - - contingency plans with respect to a potential U.S. threat. This worry about the United States and U.S. power is so notwithstanding the reality that almost all of the Indians at the conference welcomed the development of closer Indian ties with the United States.

According to an Indian naval officer, "the United States is unquestionably the most dominant player in the Indian Ocean in modern history." The United States has the capability to project military power in the region and a well-defined strategy to pursue its policy of preeminence. The U.S. maritime strategy of the 1980s envisioned a war at sea won by sea control. The new U.S. strategic thrust aims to move away from classical sea control/sea denial to influencing events further ashore as exemplified by Afghanistan. He observed: "if the U.S. objective is to share with ...other nations ...(the) enduring objective...(of) stopping the emergence of a hostile coalition, then it must remain engaged in the region. Its policies must work towards engagement rather than adopt unilateralist approaches." The Indians present also seemed anxious about how the United States will "manage" China when the PLA navy or other military forces start to operate in the Indian Ocean, as New Delhi believes likely.

India will be increasingly attentive to its interests in the Indian Ocean region in the coming years. This is suggested by a variety of considerations.

All Indian participants in the conference stressed the importance of the Indian Ocean to India from economic, political, legal and military perspectives. India's political and naval leadership is convinced that matters maritime are going to play an increasingly important and critical role. India needs a secure maritime environment to achieve sustained national development. In addition, many Indians see the Indian Ocean as India's backyard and see it as both natural and desirable for India to function as the leader and the predominant influence in this region - - the world's only region and ocean named after a single state.

To this end, there was broad agreement among the Indian delegation that India's security perimeter - - its "rightful domain" - - extends from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz and from the coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia. India, according to a senior Indian naval officer at the conference, "will have to play a very large role (in the Indian Ocean) if the prospects for peace and cooperation are to grow."

India will try to exert a strong hand in this region for fundamental national security reasons. Protecting India's EEZ of over 2.3 million square kilometers, securing India's energy lifelines, promoting overseas markets and fulfilling international commitments are some of the interests to which India is sensitive. As expressed at the conference, New Delhi's "Look East" policy, its growing ties with Israel and Africa, and even Iran, and its naval, air and nuclear weapons modernization efforts, all are related to these concerns.

Aside from India, many of the other littoral states are acquiring a more pronounced maritime orientation and developing closer links with one another. Malaysia, for example, is more focused now than ever before on the potential strategic importance of the Indian Ocean approaches to Peninsula Malaysia. Not long ago, Malaysia's navy chief said that the country's strategic location in the waterways of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean exposes the country to serious dangers. Reacting to this challenge, the Malaysian navy has inaugurated construction of a new navy base and command center at Langkawi, Kuala Lumpur's only port directly fronting the Indian Ocean.

Thailand, similarly, is now more aware of its status as an Indian Ocean littoral state. Arms trafficking in southern Thailand, which has fueled conflicts in Sri Lanka and northeast India, has come under scrutiny as Thailand's neighbors have urged a more robust response from Bangkok. In recent years, Bangkok also has joined a plethora of Indian Ocean regional organizations - - including BIMSTEC and IOR-ARC, and has pursued the so-called "Look West" policy of cultivating Indian Ocean states, especially India. Thailand lately has also shown new interest in building a canal across the Kra Isthmus to forge a shorter direct route between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, large obstacles stand in the way of this dream being realized any time soon, not the least of which is Singapore's implacable opposition to a Kra Canal.

Sub-regional efforts to promote Indian Ocean peace and security are more likely to bear fruit than are region-wide schemes. To this end, conference participants were of one mind that confidence-building and similar measures would be most successful if attempted in Bay of

Bengal (the area of operations of BIMSTEC) or the Arabian Sea or between the Indian and Pakistani navies. On the other hand, large region-wide efforts such as the “Indian Ocean Zone of Peace” concept or even the Indian Ocean Region Association for Regional Cooperation are much less likely to succeed.

Regional, sub-regional and multinational cooperation

The Indian Ocean region is noted for its complex sub-regional geopolitical and geostrategic associations, each with its own vested interest. Cooperation occurs mostly in the spheres of economy and trade, rather than in security, and is to a large extent hampered by distrust and lack of interaction. The following are the most pertinent examples of regional and sub-regional cooperation:

1. *The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC)*: IOR-ARC was established in Mauritius in March 1997 and a Charter was adopted. The Association comprises 20 member states and six dialogue partners, the Indian Ocean Tourism Organisation and the Indian Ocean Research Group has observer status. The aim of IOR-ARC is to open the region based on four major components: trade liberalisation, trade and investment facilitation, economic and technical cooperation, and trade and investment dialogue. It does not address defence and security cooperation directly as the aim of ‘open and free trade’ implies maritime security.

2. *The ‘Indian Ocean Naval Symposium’ (IONS)*: IONS is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region. The objectives of the IONS are to expand it to the next level of cooperation, create allied maritime agencies, establish a high degree of interoperability, share information to overcome common trans-national maritime threats and natural disasters, and maintain good order at sea. The group has 35 members.

3. *The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)*: The GCC was established in 1981 in response to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. Its objectives are to strengthen co-operation in agriculture, trade, industry, investment and security among its six member states.

4. *The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)*: SAARC was established in December 1985 to work towards economic and social development. Maritime cooperation is not part of the agreement. The member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

5. *The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)*: ASEAN was established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Since then, membership has expanded to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. ASEAN leaders resolved in 2003 that ASEAN should rest on three pillars, namely an ASEAN security community, an economic community and a socio-cultural community.

6. *The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)*: The ARF comprises 27 countries, namely the ten ASEAN members and 17 ‘partner states’. The ARF is the principal forum for security discourse

between Asian states and provides the opportunity to discuss regional security issues and develop cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region.

7. *Southern African Development Community (SADC)*: The SADC Treaty, signed by members in Windhoek, Namibia, on 17 August 1992, was put into force on 30 September 1993. SADC has 14 member states of which South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mauritius and Tanzania are also IOR-ARC members. The SADC Standing Maritime Committee has the aim of promoting regional peace and prosperity through maritime military co-operation.

8. *East African Community (EAC)*: The EAC is a regional intergovernmental organisation headquartered in Arusha, Tanzania, with Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi as members. It aims to improve political, economic and social development, and has the ultimate objective of establishing a political federation of East African states.

9. *Indian Ocean Commission (COI)*: The COI (Commission de l'océan indien in French) is an intergovernmental organisation created in 1984 with the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, France and the Seychelles as members.

10. *The Arab League, or League of Arabian States*: The league was formed in Cairo in March 1945 and is the regional organisation of Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa. Its current membership comprises 22 states.

11. *The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC)*: The OIC was initially founded in 1969 and its membership grew to 30 states. Its aims centre on the promotion of Islamic solidarity and cooperation in the economic, social, cultural and scientific fields.

12. *The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA)*: The FPDA is a defence relationship based on a series of bilateral agreements between the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore dating from 1971. The FPDA makes provision for defence cooperation.