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## Geopolitical Development in 21<sup>st</sup> Century of Indian Ocean Region: A Geographical Analysis

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

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#### Research Paper

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**Keywords:** *Indian Ocean region, geopolitical, A.T. Mahan, chokepoints, Gulf region, Karl Haushofer*

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### ABSTRACT

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The Indian Ocean region (IOR) has emerged as a pivotal area of global significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, characterized by its strategic location, diverse geographical features and complex geopolitical dynamics. Spanning from the coastlines of Africa to the shores of Australia, this region plays a crucial role in global trade, energy security and maritime connectivity. Geographically, the IOR is defined by its extensive coastlines, numerous islands and crucial chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait and Bab el-Mandeb. These maritime features not only facilitate international trade and shipping but also underline the region's importance for global energy supplies, with a significant portion of the world's oil and natural gas passing through its waters. Historically, the Indian Ocean has been a hub of cultural exchange, trade routes and strategic rivalries, shaped by colonial legacies and the emergence of modern nation-states. Today, it hosts diverse geopolitical interests, with major powers such as India, China, the United States and countries of the Gulf region asserting influence through naval deployments, strategic partnerships and economic investments. The Indian Ocean region is emerging as a critical area of geopolitical competition, with major powers vying for influence and

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control over its strategic waterways, resources and trade routes. The ability of regional and extra-regional states to manage these tensions and find areas of cooperation will be crucial in shaping the region's geopolitical landscape in the coming decades.

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### ***Introduction***

Geopolitics can broadly understood as the influence of geography and economics on the power status of a region or state the word geopolitics was coined by Rudolf Kjellen about the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Haushofer gave the concept of Geopolitics. Over the years, Indian Ocean has emerged as a significant geopolitical region in the world due to its strategic location and abundant resources, which draw global attention towards it. The geopolitics of Indian Ocean encompasses contemporary politics, international economy. Simultaneously its world 3rd largest ocean surrounded by four continents which is home of 1/3 population of the world as it is considered world youngest region with highest demographic dividend with 40Percentage of world oil and gas reserve. It has highest number of waterways globally, which facilitates international trade called Sea lines of communication (SLOC). While India and some of the littoral states around it appear to be locus of sustain economic growth. Some researchers shared their keynotes on dominance of sea power.

Alfred Thayer Mahan was a prominent naval historian and theorist whose views on sea power had a profound influence on naval strategy and international relations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His ideas, articulated primarily in his seminal work "The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783" published in 1890. Mahan argued that maritime dominance was crucial for national greatness and global influence. He believed that control of the sea enabled countries to protect their trade routes, secure access to resources, and project power abroad. According to Mahan, naval strategy should focus on achieving command of the sea through decisive naval battles. He emphasized the importance of building powerful, well-equipped navies capable of both offensive operations and securing sea-lanes.

Mahan stressed the geopolitical implications of sea power, asserting that nations with strong navies could control key maritime chokepoints and exert influence over distant territories. He viewed naval bases and coaling stations as critical for maintaining global reach. Mahan argued that maritime commerce was vital to a nation's economic prosperity. He believed that a strong navy was necessary to

protect merchant shipping and ensure access to overseas markets. Mahan's ideas had a significant impact on naval planning and policymaking in many countries, most notably the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. His advocacy for naval expansion contributed to the naval arms race before World War-I. Alfred Thayer Mahan's views on sea power emphasized the central role of naval strength in shaping global politics and strategy. His work continues to be studied and debated by historians and strategists interested in maritime affairs and international relations.

K.M. Panikkar in his words conveyed, who control Indian Ocean will control south Asia, who controls south Asia, will control Asia who control Asia will control in 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to him Indian Ocean had become an active through fare of commercial and cultural traffic in his study Titled “India and Indian ocean”. Needless to say, the role played by KM Panikkar in revival of maritime in reference to Indian Ocean should not be overlooked. With regard to above words in present Indian Ocean and the states on its littoral has emerged as one of the most significant Region in the world due to its Geology, economic and strategic characteristics.

Chorographically Indian Ocean is a distinct region with its own geographical identity. Localised in Eastern hemisphere, surrounded by landmass From three sides most unique due to its seasonal circulation pattern, warm temperature, abundance of oil deposit the specific chock points (Bab al-mandab, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca) Spring up the region.

### ***Study Area***

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean in the world, covering approximately 20 percentage of the Earth's water surface. It is bounded by Africa to the west, Asia to the north, Australia to the east, and the Southern Ocean to the south. The Indian Ocean spans an area of about 70.6 million square kilometres (27.2 million square miles), are making it roughly 14 times the size of the United States. It stretches from the southern coast of Asia to the coast of Africa and Australia. The western boundary of the Indian Ocean is marked by the east coast of Africa, including countries like Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique. To the north, the Indian Ocean is bordered by southern Asia, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the island nations of the Maldives and Seychelles. The eastern boundary includes the western coast of Australia, with regions like Western Australia and the Island of Madagascar.

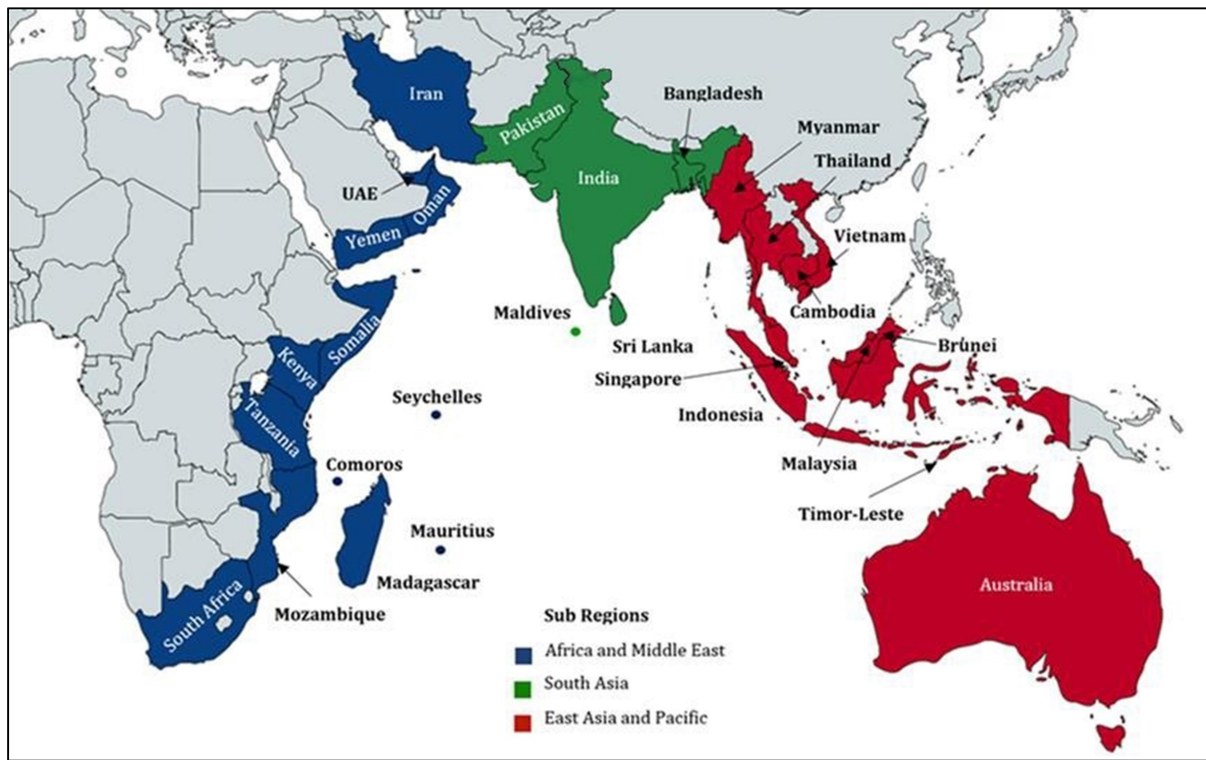


Figure 1.1: Location Map of the Study Area

Source: Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies

### Historical Development of Indian Ocean

Historical evolution of Indian Ocean before foreign invasion was not well recognised by Indian rulers, after the invasion of Europeans (Portuguese, Dutch, French, Britishers) created strategic importance of region. After the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Britishers start dominating in maritime region eliminating other European power like Dutch from Malacca, French from Mauritius, this appearance gave recognition to Indian Ocean trade routes in world.

The rivalry of different Nation's Navy started between two cold wars, the presence of Royal Indian Navy aiming to challenge super power of British in Indian Ocean. In between 20<sup>th</sup> century, British Dominance comes to end that resulted to forming vacuum in Indian Ocean reason making a period of Instability. Since the end of 1970's Indian Ocean and its littoral states had bloomed in world geopolitics consequences of which two super powers emerged at that time that is USA and USSR started making alliance with different peripheral nation in Indian Ocean, while USSR got associated by India, Iraq, Afghanistan and USA got support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel.

## ***GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIAN OCEAN REGION***

The geographical Presence of Indian Ocean from its location to surrounding Nations and its different attributes configurator as "Core region" of world. It is the third largest ocean of the world covering both hemispheres. It is landlocked surrounded by Asia in North, Africa in west, Australia in East and Antarctica in south. Several marginal seas enhance its economic importance like Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Java Sea, Persian Gulf, and Red sea. The Indian Ocean contains around 2000 islands, which have diverse origin, sizes, topographies, and geologies. Extended from the equator to sub polar region some of them are continental (Andaman Nicobar, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, some are oceanic, some of the are coral based origin like Lakshadweep majority of them are the spots of world tourism in a global context. Indian Ocean islands encompass several geologic 'type' examples. Seychelles constitutes the quintessential micro continent.

Even the Nation states around the Indian Ocean are mostly underdeveloped/developing "Third world" countries which has future arise ahead. The region is rich in natural resources containing 20 percentage of the landmass and 40percentage of the world oil and natural gas, 80percentage of the world oil shipment travel through it. East Indian Ocean represents remarkable proportion of fisheries around 45percentage of world. Most unique minerals like polymetallic nodules and polymetallic massive Sulphide draw interest towards Indian Ocean. The gulf countries and some of the African countries abundant in oil reserve make is hub of energy resources.

The most Geostrategic factor create importance of Indian ocean is its various checkpoints (Bab al-mandap, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Mozambique channel) which play a instrumental role in world trade due to which rivalry is going among China, Japan, USA, South Korea to control these crucial location and SLOCs. The huge demographic dividend of countries like India, Bangladesh etc is nearly 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of population creates Spoke hub of market. Which created globally economic shift towards Asia since 1<sup>st</sup> decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century becoming a center of gravity for world economy. As its surrounding nation have largest economy (India, UAE, Saudi Arabia) states with largest population making it right set of circumstances for upbringing development.

A report from Lakshman Kadigamar Institute, a think tank based on Sri Lanka, estimates that Indian ocean economy will account for 20percentage of global GDP by 2025. The huge market and

metropolitan cities on the coastal region of countries like India, east Asian countries give boost to market Technological advancement enlarged more seabed mineral exploration increasing commercial fisheries, use of GPS and Radar allow ship to venture into the Open sea. Indian Ocean is busiest trade route corridor carrying 2/3 of the global oil shipment, nearly 80percentage of China's, 90percentage of South Korea's and 90percentage of Japan oil pass through Indian Ocean. In reference of India, the Indian Ocean region is making nearly 80percentage of crude oil, 90percentage of trade. The Indian Ocean rim association is regional cooperation was formed in 1997 promote economy corporation and command.

Indian Ocean having favourable condition for biodiversity with diverse marine life as well as coral reef ecosystem Lakshadweep Island and endemic species with most unique forests like Sundarbans in Bay of Bengal environmental identity had built its specific significance in world promoting tourism. However, simultaneously with increase in human activities, Risk is emerging like climate change, rising sea level, pollution proving to be great threat to coming century.

The dynamics of Indian Ocean with its all reference magnify it but within that, a pinpointing view of Managing its Geopolitical is emerging a new challenging factor due to its various Geostrategic regions which tends to include all the characteristics that make tremendous influence in world [Dowdy and Trood 1983]. The rise of China and emergence of India, The two-superpower nation's rivalry in Indian Ocean has been becoming the important factor of geopolitical development.

To combat India and USA, China attempts its presence in Indian Ocean region through various means by creating the military base and infrastructure ports at littoral states as like Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Gwadar port in Pakistan, Chittagong port in Bangladesh, a great military base in Djibouti 2017, gulf of Aden 2008, US department of defence report referred it as "string of pearls" 2005 to make India insecure. Not only has this, recently in 2023 it been traced new military basis in Coco Island north of Andaman and Nicobar of Myanmar to monitor India. In order to neutralise India influence, China has entered into strategic partnership with number of countries and making debt diplomacy with them. To over shadow China presence, India owned Chabahar port in Iran and making other infrastructure aspired to build power status by acquiring effective military capabilities, sustain democracy, and deeper footprint in world. India has always been a keen supporter to the cause of keeping the Indian Ocean a Zone of peace.

The solidarity of India ocean rim association, QUAD group, I2U2, ASEAN group, BIMSTEC countries are the leading part of Region. Indian Ocean is increasing its role in global security and considers its



pioneer role in coming decades of 21st Century which appearing to be theatre of competition among global Nation. The effects of Indian Ocean are beyond its adjacent areas playing the role of Geopolitical keystone. With increasing Indian Ocean importance in global rate its maritime security concern are also growing. It is facing critical instability of shipping lines and trade routes facing with threat from piracy originating of the cost of Somalia Since 2007.

### ***Conclusion***

The Indian Ocean has shaped much of political history. It now holds the key to our future...It is also lifeline to global commerce. It is home to vast array of global opportunities and challenges. It is apparent that the geopolitical developments in the Indian Ocean region reflect a complex interplay of geographical, political, economic and security factors. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, scholars and stakeholders aiming to navigate the opportunities and challenges in this strategically vital part of the world.

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