

## Abstract

*As India, China is facing a standoff along the LAC especially in the [Galwan Valley of Ladakh](#). We need to have a naval assessment of Indian Ocean region. What is the role of geography in the region, who are the key players and what are the possible advantage that the Indian Navy is having in the region. Further, we will also look at the possible alliance and group in the region and what will be the possible impact thereafter. Now the question that will answer, whether India shall dictate the region on its will or being a democracy it will allow the regional powers to have a stake in the region?*

*Another question that needs to be answered about is the preparedness of the Indian Navy in the region and how it can counter the rising Chinese presence. At last, what are the possible groupings that can be formed to keep this region as the zone of peace as it was always called so.*



PLA Navy/ Image source: Xinhua

## Introduction

Due to the emergence of China as the key player in the region and in the world, the world order is shaping in a quite dramatic fashion post-COVID-19 pandemic. This whole situation brought the Indian Ocean region (which is always termed as the zone of peace) in the sharp focus of world politics.

The reason is the geographical location of the whole region. Indian Ocean region is the junction point of east and the west. On the one hand, it has countries having huge markets and on the other hand, it has countries having an abundance of natural resources. India lying at the epicentre of the region is a natural and crucial player in the region. Any change in the status quo will have direct impact on India's national security and integrity.

China, on the other hand, is quite outnumbered with its geography in the region, as its mainland is far from its possibly main market i.e. Africa and Europe. China, not only want to dominate the region to secure its trade connectivity to the world but also want to keep the region under its influence. This is the point where the clashes of interest happen between India and China. India being a historically dominant player in the region does not want to lose any of its influence.

These clashes of interest can be seen in the recent past when China gain access to the port of [Hambantota in Sri Lanka](#) and tries to muddle in the internal politics of Maldives. Further for china to project it as a global power need tight control over the region as it is largely dependent on the Indian Ocean for its energy supply and access to the world market. This is a point where its national interest clashes with the interest of the USA. The USA while following the principle of [Alfred Thayer Mahan](#) dominated the region by its base at [Diego Garcia](#) and any altercation by china in the region will be seen as suspicious by the USA.

India being the largest country in the region with favourable geography can never allow any player to undermine its influence. As any such move will directly challenge India's national security and national interest. Thus, it is crucial for India not only to enhance its presence in the region but also to improve relationships with littoral countries. Gaining access to the port in Oman (Duqm) Seychelles (Assumption Island) and Indonesia (Sabang) is the right move.

India is the natural guardian of the Indian Ocean not because it's named after it but it is the geography of the region that decides so.



## Understanding the geography of the Indian Ocean region

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world and constitutes about 20% of the water on the earth surface. It is surrounded on the west by East Africa, on the north by India, on the east by ASEAN, Australia and in the south lays vast Antarctica. It is physically the most complex of the five main oceans in the world as it contains the extensive marginal sea, strait, bays, choke points and some of the largest archipelago in the world.

The region can also be termed as energy corridor as it amount for 40% of the world trade and 20% seaborne oil trade. Apart from this, the region is set to hold large energy reserve and also favours the climate for abundant fisheries. The route from the Mediterranean passing through Suez channel reaches to red sea further extending to Arabian Sea of Indian Ocean through the strait of Bab-al-Mandeb. This directly links Europe to the Asian nation and is the possible shortest route to link South Asia with Europe.

Another possible route is all the way through South Africa's port Augulas. The Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean extends to pacific through the narrow Malacca Strait. The strait like Bab-al Mandeb, Strait of Hormoz, Strait of Malacca has some of the geopolitical importance in the game of becoming a world power. According to American thinker A T Mahan, *'those who control the sea control the world'* and to control the sea, the control of important checkpoint is necessary. On the other hand, thinkers like Mackinder argued that to rule the world, land-based power is crucial and relied on his heartland theory, where central Asia is considered to be the heartland. If we closely monitor both the theory, they collide in the Indian Ocean region. On one hand, all the major checkpoint lie in the Indian Ocean and on the other it's very easy to access the Indian Ocean through central Asia via Pakistan and

Iran.



Image source: U.S. Navy

## **The key players in the region**

With the Arabian Sea in the west, Bay of Bengal in the east and the Indian Ocean in the south, India is at the epicentre and also the largest country in the region is the natural guardian. Indian navy at present have 62,252 active personnel and 55,000 reserve personnel in the service and has a fleet of 295 ships, boats and aircraft. Besides having such powerful navy India has a geographical advantage in the region. Andaman and Nicobar Island where India's tri-service command is stationed is just 568 km away from Indonesia's Sabang port. India is also developing a deep water port in Sabang through its [Act East](#)

[Policy](#) initiative and countering Chinese increasing presence in the region. Assumption Island is believed to be India's first naval base along with Agalega Island in Mauritius, put India in the controlling position of the region.

Also, the closeness of Africa and access to 'Duqm' port of Oman gives India a strategically advantage. Further, with the Chabahar port in Iran, India can have access to heartland i.e. central Asia and can easily control the Chinese and Pakistani movement in the region.

Another important, rather the most important power in the region lies with the USA. With its camp justice base in Diageo Garcia of Chagos island situated at the middle of the Indian Ocean region and with camp Lemonnies in Djibouti it has access to the entire trading route.

Further, the USA has stationed its elite 5th fleet in Bahrain to meet with any emergency in the region. China, on the other hand, is new to the region but the boost its ancient maritime silk route to change the power centre in the region. After becoming the second-largest economy in the world, China is enhancing its footprint in the region.

Though the Chinese mainland is far away from the Indian Ocean region, its heavy investment in the littoral countries of the region gave it access to the important trade route. Under [CPEC](#) (China-Pakistan economic corridor) and CMEC ([China Myanmar](#) economic corridor) project, Beijing is trying to reduce its dependence on the Malacca Strait and with this, it will have easy access to the both Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal in the region. China is already acquiring the access of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and developed its first military base at Djibouti.

The increasing footprint of China started heating up the water in the region. China's presence is challenging both regional as well as a global hegemony. Regionally its conflict is with India as it has almost surrounded India through its '[string of pearl](#)' theory thus garlanding India through the various port and military bases. Globally it is challenging the US' presence.

Though it is quite obvious that being a 2<sup>nd</sup> largest economy in the world, the PLA Navy is on upper hand comparing to India. One cannot forget that it's not only the ship in the sea that counts but the base for refuelling and logistic that matters the most. Here, India is blessed with geographical advantage and even the US, which boast to have the world best navy will re-invent its strategy, when it comes to countering India in the Indian Ocean region. Further, the nation against china's bullying in the South China Sea can also be used as India's tactical advantage.



Image source: Stars and Stripes

### **Whether alliance with other nation required? If yes! What can be the possible one?**

Former naval officer and head of maritime policy initiative at ORF Abhijit Singh support the idea of the possible alliance in the Indian Ocean region. Especially, when, we look at the nibbling tactics of dragon at the LAC. The Indian Ocean is the strategic advantage for India. However, the way with which it can be utilized was never been done. India always tries to protect its integrity and it has always been seen as its weakness. The long-standing conflict of India with china at LAC can easily be bargained, if New Delhi would've used the Indian ocean to its advantage.

As mentioned earlier china totally depends on Malacca strait, not only for its energy need but also for its access to the world market. Even after developing various port and military base, china is in no way match to India's geographical advantage. India Ocean region is the point where our interest collides with that of the US, Japan, and Australia along with small

power like Indonesia.

All other regional or global powers, by no mean, want any Chinese presence in the region. This further gives a tactical and diplomatic advantage to New Delhi. Increasing conflict between the US and China bring two democracies together. Allying with the US will always benefit India for various reasons. First, the US by no mean is an existential threat to India. In fact, both the nation shares the warmth of democracy which can be advocated in the region for better peace and security in the region. Second, the interest of both the nation in the Indian Ocean is to secure the trade in the region and subdue any change in the status quo. Third, America as an ally will defiantly give India access to the key international platforms with the added advantage of technology transfer. Last but not the least, India will be in much more talking term with its hostile neighbours as allying with the US will mean allying with the regional powers like Japan, Australia and Indonesia.

Thus when we talk about the grouping like [QUAD](#) (India, Japan, Australia and the USA), it remains the obvious choice not only to counter China but for regional peace and security. Not always the military alliance keeps the regional peace and stability intact but initiatives like regional grouping can serve far better results. Thus, grouping like BIMSTEC, ASEAN plus needs to be given greater weight to ease out the pressure in the region.

Thus grouping with a motive like '*Panchseel*' can make a difference in the regional peace. The regional grouping is far more superior than allying with any superpower. Allying with the superpower can potentially lead to a compromise in sovereignty and also became the victim of superpower national interest.

Regional grouping gives the sense of collective security by following the concept of 'one for all and all for one'. Thus, in the region like the Indian Ocean, where small countries also have a stake, regional grouping can be a far superior option to counter any bullying by economic or military power. Thus, India's [Neighbourhood First Policy](#) needs a re-look and this policy can be turned into a military alliance which can keep the region more peaceful and secure.

## Conclusion

China is building a string of influence- militarily and politically in the Indian Ocean region. Much will depend on how India reacts to this assertiveness of mighty dragon. Though, currently, we are lagging way behind China in term of economic power but with the added advantage of geography, we are at par with the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean region.

The Indian Ocean is always termed as the 'Zone of Peace' but with the sprouting of so much interest of the regional and world powers in the region, the water of the Indian Ocean region is heating up.

It all depends on India whether it can come out assertively with all its power to keep the region under its influence.

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## Naval assessment of Indian Ocean Region with a comparative focus to other players

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