

GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION FOR MILITARY BASING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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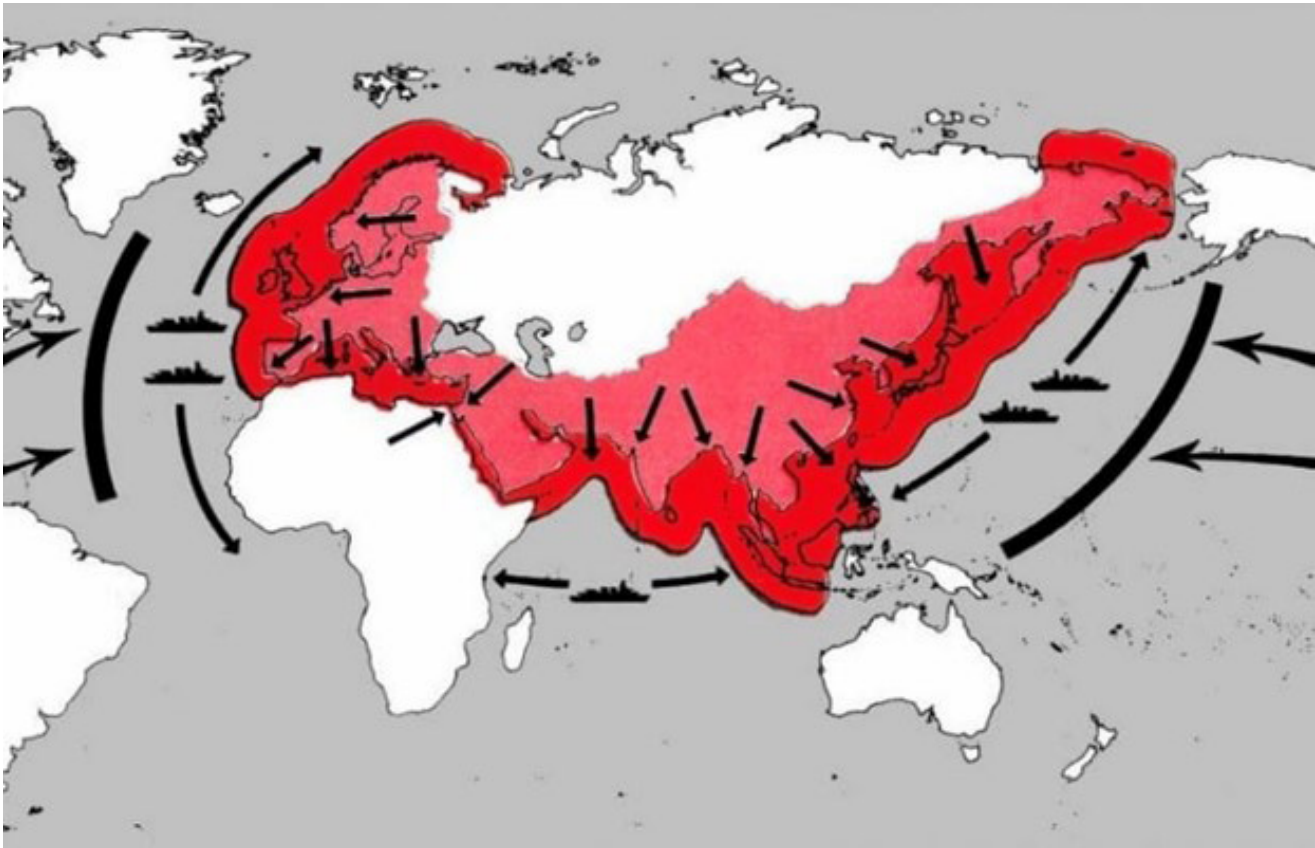
Executive summary

Military basing and access across the Indian Ocean region (IOR) is an important – and asymmetric – object of strategic competition in the contemporary international security environment. The region’s maritime geography and the major powers’ varied security interests in the theater are shaping the force postures and strategic interactions of America, China, India, Australia, France, and Britain as they pursue regional military basing and access objectives. China, in particular, is seeking to establish a greater military presence and a more robust operational foothold in the IOR, heightening the United States’ strategic interest in the region. America’s changing global force posture and the high-end challenges it faces in the western Pacific and Europe make the legacy U.S. basing network in the region ill-suited to meet growing international security demands. Given that the United States shares certain threat perceptions and objectives with key regional maritime democracies and other like-minded partners, Washington should develop deeper security and economic partnerships as it rebalances its IOR posture to meet the asymmetric challenge posed by the PRC.

The strategic geography of the Indian Ocean region

The Indian Ocean is the maritime strategic axis of Asia. It connects the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean and South China Sea, producing the vital “rimland” position around much of the Eurasian landmass (see figure 1).¹ This wide maritime commons washes the shores of South and East Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, which altogether constitute the IOR. Importantly, this mega-region comprises six island nations and scattered French, British, and Australian territories across the southern and eastern Indian Ocean. The strategic interests and corresponding military requirements of the major powers vary considerably across these different arenas. However, all the powers face the same geostrategic reality: access and maneuver in the Indian Ocean are necessary to meet military objectives in its subregions.

Nicholas Spykman's "Rimland" geostrategic map



Source: Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), 54. "Map 48. Maritime Versus Amphibian Conflict"

The Indian Ocean's maritime space is more integrated than the disparate continental subregions it connects.² Its main characteristic is its long east-west span across the southern flank of Eurasia. Its northern tier traces several distinct marginal seas: the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Bay of Bengal, and Andaman Sea. The vast southern tier, by contrast, is open ocean — save for the scattered territories of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands, Australian Indian Ocean Islands, and British Indian Ocean Territories of the Chagos Archipelago, notably including the critical strategic island of Diego Garcia.³

Most importantly from a basing and access standpoint, the IOR is constricted by narrow chokepoints at its eastern and western approaches and at its key gulfs and bays (see figure 2):

- Bab-el-Mandeb Strait — Red Sea — Suez Canal:** The northerly access point to the IOR runs from the Mediterranean through the Suez and exits the Red Sea via the Bab-al-Mandeb at the Horn of Africa. Disruptions to global trade that resulted from the Ever Given container ship's blockage of the Suez Canal in spring 2021 illustrate the vital economic importance of this series of chokepoints.⁴

- **Straits of Malacca – Sunda – Lombok – Ombai – Wetar – Torres:** The hyphen in the middle of the name “Indo-Pacific” stands in for a vital geographic pivot: the constricting complex of maritime straits and channels created by the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago, and Australia. Defining the far east of the Indian Ocean basin, these land features channelize all of the sea lanes to and from East Asia and the Pacific into a small number of narrow tracks.
- **Hormuz Strait – Gulf of Oman:** As the sole maritime entrance to the Persian Gulf and its vast hydrocarbon wealth, the Hormuz Strait and Gulf of Oman constitute an especially critical choke-point. Dominated by Iran’s long coastline along its northern tier, yet indispensable to the security of all the major powers, the Persian Gulf and its only access point are almost inevitably a focal point of regional contestation and geostrategic competition.

FIGURE 2

Indian Ocean maritime zones and chokepoints



Source: Darshana Baruah, “The Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/indian-ocean-map>.

Military postures and basing interests in the IOR

Each major power is heavily invested in protecting its interests in the IOR, but each has allocated its investments in different ways when it comes to military basing and access. Geography, as ever, establishes the primary conditions for these strategic decisions: Distant powers (for example, the U.S., U.K., and France) require installations on foreign soil to sustain operations of any scale in the region. Local powers (for example, India, Iran, the Gulf states, and Australia) can project power in the region from their home territories. China lies somewhere in between, owing to its contiguity to nations directly on the Indian Ocean but also to the circuitous maritime transits required to access the region.

Before discussing the competitive dynamics among the major powers, a review of the major powers' interests and posture in the IOR will establish the geostrategic setting.

UNITED STATES

America's global alliance commitments and long-standing defense policy require U.S. joint forces to project combat power in every world region. In practice, this has meant maintaining a significant military footprint in the IOR, concentrated in the greater Middle East where the U.S. military has been deployed in combat operations near continuously since the end of the Cold War. With dedicated facilities in Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Djibouti, and elsewhere, forward-deployed and rotational United States forces possess significant air, land, sea, and space capabilities in the western Indian Ocean.

The United States deploys substantially fewer forces in the southern and eastern IOR subregions, with two notable exceptions. The joint U.S.-U.K. installation at Diego Garcia provides logistical and

communications support to U.S. forward-deployed operational forces in the IOR, and it has been indispensable during virtually all U.S. missions in the region since the 1970s.⁵ At the region's easternmost point, the U.S. Navy also has a rotational presence for an aircraft carrier and littoral combat ships at Singapore's Changi Naval Base (though these are U.S. 7th Fleet assets that operate predominantly in the Pacific).

The basic objectives guiding U.S. global basing decisions have varied over the years, with counterterrorism and irregular warfare in the greater Middle East consuming the majority of U.S. effort and resources in the early 21st century. Today, those missions have given way to higher U.S. priorities to deter Iran in the region and compete with China globally, placing U.S. regional basing needs in a state of flux.

CHINA

Compared to the U.S. posture in the region, China is (and will likely remain) "underweight" on military basing – even as it doggedly pursues agreements and installations across the IOR. With neither legacy force deployments nor security commitments to allies or partners in the region, China's main line of effort has been to build its economic access to regional markets and resources. Beijing's threat perceptions, however, have changed in a new era of great power strategic competition.

During China's now-ended "period of strategic opportunity,"⁶ Beijing relied almost exclusively on the United States and its maritime partners to invest in the regional security and stability necessary to sustain essential commodity shipments flowing back to the mainland.⁷ But Beijing now perceives significantly greater threats from the United States and, meanwhile, is more capable of protecting its overseas interests on its own. China's leaders are therefore making concerted efforts to establish a basing and logistics network in the region.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) base at Djibouti is the first in its class and probably not the last. However, this lone outpost on the far western edge of the theater lies at the end of tenuous external lines. With no mutual support from other dedicated Chinese military facilities in the region, the Djibouti base is isolated and operationally quite limited. As currently configured, the "Djibouti overseas support base" may well be best suited for the counterpiracy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and other noncombat missions that China somewhat implausibly suggests are its sole intended purposes.⁸

Lacking a network of bases, dual-use commercial facilities have become the essential nodes for China's growing naval operations across the IOR.⁹ In 2015, the PLA's "strategic tasks" formally expanded to include "safeguarding China's overseas interests."¹⁰ For China's navy, this means developing the capabilities and installations necessary to provide "open seas protection" in the "far seas."¹¹ The essence of this mission is protecting the sea lines of communication connecting East Asia to the western Indian Ocean and East Africa. This maritime lifeline carries existentially important maritime trade and commodities to China's populous eastern seaboard.¹²

This economic dependence on IOR shipping presents a profound security challenge for PRC leadership, given the vulnerability of Chinese assets, citizens, and sea-lanes to disruption, crisis, and other threats. For navy leadership, this demands developing a fleet and force posture suited to project regional power sufficient to protect Chinese assets in IOR nations, and in transit across the theater. Without legacy bases, however, China has opted to leverage an existing network of some 25 port assets across the region to address the logistical challenges of operating out-of-area in the IOR.¹³

INDIA

The Indian subcontinent is the eponymous and most conspicuous feature in the IOR. Bisecting the northern Indian Ocean, it quite literally shapes the

theater. India is the regional power of most consequence in the IOR and is actively building itself into a "net security provider" in the region — and doing so in close cooperation with its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners (Australia, Japan, and the United States), as well as France and other maritime allies and partners.¹⁴

India's military presence and capability in the major littoral areas of the IOR are considerable, owing to a significant geographic home-field advantage and deep-seated influence in regional states.¹⁵ Beyond the concentrated Indian forces on the subcontinent, Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is home to India's easternmost and only tri-service theater command (commanding army, navy, and air forces). With a capable force close to the Malacca Straits, India expresses its security interests in Southeast Asia and positions itself to better observe and address growing PLA activity in the Indian Ocean.

Indeed, India has watched keenly as China has dramatically expanded its operational repertoire in the IOR over the last decade. The PLA's carrier program, its submarine deployments, its military diplomacy, its robust logistics and intelligence posture, and many other steady advances in both capability and capacity have concerned the Indian naval and defense community for years. More recently, since the fatal border clashes with PLA forces in the Galwan Valley in summer 2020, these security concerns have brought a harder line on China to mainstream Indian foreign and even economic policy discourse.

AUSTRALIA

Anchoring the southeastern Indian Ocean, Australia is one of only two naturally Indo-Pacific nations (alongside Indonesia). The Indian Ocean theater is thus a direct and high Australian priority, particularly when it comes to China and cooperation with Quad partners. In recent years, burgeoning Australia-India ties under the banner of the Quad framework have brought significant Australian attention to a range of strategic IOR issues.¹⁶

FRANCE

French territories across the western and southern Indian Ocean make France a pseudo-resident power in the region. The country's renewed attention to the Indo-Pacific as a "priority for France" has resulted in a planned deployment of the Charles de Gaulle carrier strike group in the Indian Ocean to complement a growing range of naval and maritime security operations from France's scattered island territories. These territories provide points d'appui for sophisticated French forces to contribute critical capacity, maritime domain awareness, and diplomatic weight toward regional security cooperation.¹⁷

UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom is a major player in the wider European "Indo-Pacific tilt."¹⁸ The Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) framework is an important emerging vector of U.K. security interest in the region. Even with limited capacity in this distant theater, the United Kingdom is fundamentally important to Indian Ocean basing considerations because it hosts the indispensable American logistics support base at Diego Garcia. This contractual arrangement has not yet been explicitly challenged as part of Britain's sovereignty dispute with Mauritius, but access must be carefully attended and managed.

Competitive basing dynamics and opportunities for U.S. policy

Surveying the major powers' basing interests and activities in the IOR, a striking asymmetry is laid bare. On one side is the United States, with a robust basing network concentrated in the western Indian Ocean. This American power is embedded in multiple alliances and partnerships that have been routinely employed in combat and noncombat joint operations across the region. On the other side is

China, leading with its economic engagement and obviously lagging with its military force posture. These asymmetric competitive positions offer the following opportunities to shore up American interests in the IOR and should guide basic basing decisions.

EXPLOIT ASYMMETRIES WITH LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS

Even as it seeks basing and other access arrangements, China does so in pursuit of a relatively modest (if rapidly evolving) set of strategic objectives. These objectives center on protecting seaborne trade and sustaining China's overall economic access to the region. Any successful U.S.-led effort to counter PLA military inroads in the IOR must provide clear value to offset economic losses from foregone trade and investment with China. In defense partnerships, this will mean exploring new areas of arms sales, technology sharing, security assistance, military exercises, and naval interoperability.

China will remain competitive in the IOR largely on the strength of its status as the leading trading nation in the region. Trade flows are sources of considerable leverage in China's relations with regional powers. By cultivating close commercial and diplomatic ties with nations across the IOR, China cultivates key states to remain on the sidelines in the event of any future conflict with the U.S. and its partners, and uncooperative with efforts to sanction or interdict China's trade across the region. As such, even U.S. allies and partners show varied levels of comfort in joining U.S. efforts to overtly counter China. As a rule, states are not interested in alienating China as an economic partner. There is thus a major payoff for U.S. policy that calibrates efforts and initiatives such that they meet but do not exceed the nations' appetites for competing with China).

Various permutations of partnerships among Australia, France, India, Japan, and the UK form a core of strong states with capable navies and with some level of shared threat perceptions on China. Enhanced regional maritime security cooperation is already in progress under the auspices of the Quad,

AUKUS, India-Israel-U.S.-UAE (I2U2), India-France, and several other emerging partnerships. Such multilateral (maritime) security initiatives will not directly counter China's military basing and access across the IOR, but they will build a constituency of states cooperating toward a more secure region. Growing PLA capabilities and activities will look even more conspicuous against the backdrop of a robust, multi-lateral regional maritime security architecture.

PRICE IN CHINA'S ROLE AS A "REGIME SECURITY" PROVIDER

There is no law dictating that China must inevitably fill a vacuum left by the disengaging US forces in the region. Even if the United States were to abandon its role as a regional security provider (an extreme assumption), there would be little appetite among regional states for simply substituting China in America's place. China lacks the security interests, capabilities, and military relationships in the region that would be required to play that external balancing role. More broadly, it is pursuing an alternative, asymmetric set of strategic objectives that likely do not prescribe significant military involvement in the region's many international conflicts.

By contrast to the US role as an external security provider in the IOR, China's nascent security partnerships involve no countervailing Chinese offer to provide military aid to allies in distress, to deter hostile actors, or to secure the free flow of hydrocarbons. Instead, China is explicitly seeking to protect certain narrowly defined equities: its citizens, its economic assets, and its sea lines of communication. As such, it engages in largely transactional military relationships – and not only or even especially with counterpart militaries, but with security agencies and police forces in countries that in many cases see China's draconian surveillance and social control as a great accomplishment in governance rather than an infringement of human rights and civil liberties.¹⁹ Surveillance, policing, and other social control-oriented technologies are China's differentiated products on offer for export. However unpalatable, PRC-provided regime security is not necessarily in direct competition with U.S.-provided regional security.

OBSERVE THE LIMITS OF THE "DJIBOUTI MODEL"

The announcement of the first overseas PLA base at Djibouti in 2017 generated an expectation of future Chinese bases across the IOR. Six years on, the lack of any additional bases is a telling indication of the rare opportunity presented by the tiny nation on the Horn of Africa. The confluence of lesser levels of foreign scrutiny in the period 2015-17, the standing United Nations authorization for a multilateral anti-piracy mission, and Djibouti's status as an existing multilateral military basing hub were unusually permissive conditions for PRC basing.²⁰

Chinese officials have reportedly sought agreements to build and operate additional military facilities in the region, with the most advanced negotiations evidently underway in the UAE.²¹ Beijing may yet succeed on the strength of its tremendous economic bargaining leverage and appealing regime security services. But to do so, China will have to overcome concerted efforts by an increasingly attentive United States that still wields substantial military and political influence with allies and partners across the region. These relationships narrow China's options for obtaining further military access to facilities in the region.

RECALIBRATE THE "INDO" IN INDO-PACIFIC

The "free and open Indo-Pacific" framework has understandably skewed towards the western Pacific, the theater where open conflict with China is most conceivable. This emphasis may be appropriate, but requires further thought on what links these two great oceans. From China's perspective, the Indian Ocean is the logistical rear for any conflict on its maritime frontier (that is, over Taiwan and other disputed islands in the South and East China Seas); its existential purpose is to convey flows of vital resources to the mainland to support efforts in the primary warfighting theater. Degrading Beijing's confidence that a major campaign in the western Pacific could be sustained from Indian Ocean supply lines for a protracted period should enhance deterrence.²²

Conclusion

To effectively compete in the IOR over the long term, the United States needs to leverage the opportunities provided by fundamental U.S.-China asymmetries — in economic interest, military capability and capacity, and strategic objectives. Major powers, especially India, Australia, France, Japan, and the United

Kingdom, share certain important security interests in the IOR. However, their appetites for confrontation and cooperation with China vary, dictating a U.S. policy of building and institutionalizing certain basic common interests in maritime security and economic openness. The Indian Ocean should be embraced as a medium that can unite partners to better manage Chinese maritime power.

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