

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean: international maritime actors in the region

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The Indian Ocean is evolving as an important region for global naval powers due to various strategic advantages and containing the growing influence of China. Most of the international maritime actors in the Indian Ocean have a direct interest in the region and wish to maintain a free, open, inclusive and a rule-based order for protecting their people, assets and other interests not only in the region but also domestically.

India

The Indian leadership relies on its own geographic advantages and China's disadvantages in the Indian Ocean. Some instances where Indian leadership have expressed concern and caution include the Chinese deployment of submarines for its anti-piracy missions in the Horn of Africa. A secure Indian Ocean is therefore central to India's security environment. From a naval and maritime perspective, the Indian Navy understands the importance of the region in terms of both establishing itself as a key player as well as in securing its interests, as India's own trade and energy routes to the Persian Gulf are dependent on a safe, open and stable Indian Ocean region.

EU

The naval military presence of the EU in the Western Indian Ocean is represented the renown EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta, whose main mandate is to protect vessels of the World Food Programme (WFP) and deter, prevent and repress piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Horn of Africa, and by the European-led Maritime Awareness mission in the Strait of Hormuz, EMASoH Operation AGENOR, which has contributed to ensuring the freedom of navigation in the Strait of

Hormuz based on principles of neutrality, dialogue and de-escalation. However, as a way to ensure an enhanced naval deployment by the Member States in the Indian Ocean region, the EU launched the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept, modelled on the pilot case in the Gulf of Guinea. In the North Western Indian Ocean, the CMP would operate in a new maritime area of interest (MAI) from the Strait of Hormuz to the Southern Tropic and from the north of the Red Sea towards the centre of the Indian Ocean. Of course, beside opening new opportunities for strategic dialogue with key partners and facilitating the exchange of information through MAI Coordination Cell (MAICC) based in Brussels, the CMP is means of enhancing the EU's status as a global security provider, which is one of the pillars of the new EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific. Beside the presence of naval vessels, the EU focuses its efforts as soft power through the provision of capacity building, training, equipment and support through development and cooperation projects such as CRIMARIO, MASE, Port Security and Safety of Navigation, Red Sea Programme and Go Blue.

France

France is a resident power in the Indian Ocean, with the overseas territories of Reunion and Mayotte and military forces deployed in Djibouti and UAE. France's commitment to maritime security in the Indian Ocean is mainly based on the improvement of the regional MDA architecture and the establishment of global dialogues with the major maritime powers. The country has deployed liaison officers in IFC-IOR near New Delhi and alongside the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles, it is a member of the IOC, which has maritime security as fulcrum of its actions. Moreover, France currently holds the presidency of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and it is soon to become a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), two important engagements which could be considered symbols of the growing regional integration of French territories in the Indian Ocean.

UK

The United Kingdom has also increased its naval activities and conducted large naval exercises in the region, trying to build a 'community of like-minded sea powers' to secure 'a free and stable maritime domain' in the Indian Ocean. Military speaking, the increasing presence of the UK in the region is quite visible: in 2021, the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and its strike task group sailed into the Indian Ocean region, where it conducted joint exercises with the Indian Navy as part of Britain's efforts to enhance its profile in the Indo-Pacific. The UK has an established security presence in the Gulf through the Naval Support Facility in Bahrain and Joint Logistics Support Base in Oman, as well as participation in joint forces like the CMF and Operation Atalanta.

US

In the last few years, the United States has supported India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. The shared objectives in keeping the Indian Ocean region safe, secure, and stable provides a strong basis for collaborations in the region. Although the Pacific and Southeast Asia remains the fulcrum of US engagement in the Indo-Pacific, it seems that the Biden Administration is increasing its attention more and more on the Indian Ocean. In fact, a more proactive economic and security engagements in the IOR would enable the United States' ability to compete with and counter China, and to a lesser extent Russia and Iran in the short and long term.

China

The Indian Ocean is a key trading route for China's energy supplies and routes. China began expanding its reach in the Indian Ocean opening its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.

Unfortunately, most governments divide the Indian Ocean into continental sub-regions and thus, classified the Chinese facility in Djibouti as an African development rather than an Indian Ocean development. However, the strategic position of Djibouti for the Indian Ocean is undeniable. China also has massive investments in the port industry, being directly involved in the construction of 13 ports, like the EUR 1.6 billion invested in the construction of the deep-water port in Gwadar in Pakistan. Besides being port contractors, Chinese companies have direct financial involvement in other projects, such as concession agreements to lease ports or terminals in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Australia and the UAE. As such, the Indian Ocean is an important theatre for China in establishing itself as a credible security actor as well as to secure its interests and protect its maritime vulnerabilities.

Russia

In the 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, the Indian Ocean was identified by Russia as one of six regional priority areas in the maritime domain with the intensification of its commercial and other maritime activities in the area and the enforcement of maritime security through a forward naval presence and good relations with regional states as one of the main objectives. In this, Russia's growing involvement in the region appears driven by an overall objective to secure a long-term niche presence in a strategically important and lucrative part of the world. Today, Russia's attention is oriented elsewhere but expanding influence by building partners and engaging through networks with geographic links to the Indian Ocean is likely to remain one of the focuses in its geopolitics of the coming years.

The freedom of navigation and peaceful cooperative use of the seas is being promoted in the Indian Ocean region. The presence of international partners can today be associated with other issues other than piracy, such as energy security, safety of life at sea, economic development, environmental protection. This creates further space for international actors to increase connections and foster cooperation with regional partners with the aim of guaranteeing the safety and security of the Indian section of the Indo-Pacific concept.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the European Union or its members.

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