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Arms Race in the Indian Ocean: Redefining Strategic Stability

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean has become an epicenter for increasingly expanding arms races, with significant far-reaching implications for the region's strategic balance. India, China, the United States, as well as region-specific stakeholders like Pakistan, are expanding their naval forces at an accelerated rate, motivated by security objectives as well as deep-rooted distrust. Building naval fleets, submarine capabilities, as well as military alliances reflects the quintessential security dilemma actions of one nation in trying to secure safety, results in defensive reactions from others, triggering spirals of increasing militarization. This paper draws on the lens of neo-realism in analyzing how hegemonic desires as well as power dynamics between leaders are leading towards regional tensions. Thomas Hobbes' timeless observation that 'the condition of man is a condition of war of everyone against everyone' aptly reflects the competitive nature of the Indian Ocean's strategic environment. In conducting documentary analysis, the research considers this race for weapons in the neo-realist prism, with particular emphasis on the international system's inherently anarchical structure as well as states' insatiable demand for power as well as security. In providing us with a map towards stability, the paper also draws on elements of cooperation in terms of neo-liberalism, calling for cooperative security strategies such as the role of international institution, trust-building measures, as well as economic interdependence that can assist in lowering conflict risk as well as increasing strategic stability.

Keywords: Arms race, Strategic stability, Security Dilemma, Neo-realism, Neo-liberalism.

Introduction

The European and American continents have hegemonically sustained their position in the international political structure subjugating over the economic, political and military realms. However, after the 9/11 attack became deeply imprinted in historical consciousness, the situation in the international arena got reoriented in terms of domination due to several factors. Among the factors was

United States prominent intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq which consequently caused serious economic fragmentation. With the emerging powers in the Indo-pacific including China, India and revivalism of Russia in military and economic aspects, many scholars have found a common ground in terms of the anticipation that the global economic structure is re-orienting from the Atlantic to the Indo-pacific region. The region has become a central competitive stage in which dominating actors are attempting to secure their respective positions, each attempting to achieve their role as a hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. (GORAYA, 2024)

The Indian Ocean region is significantly important in terms of its strategic setting as it serves a bridge between Oceania, Asia, Africa, and Europe. South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the Red Sea, and Africa are some of the sub-regions that make up the immense Indian Ocean region. The region has geo-economic significance embedded in it as it is encompassing 27.9 percent of oil and gas reserves of the globe. And with the radically emerging economic actors including US, China, Japan, and Europe, touching the shore of this marine body, the Indian ocean has become a central hub for maritime trade. (Mehmood, 2023)

Supremacy of an actor in this region can pave the way for it to reign over global trade and politics as the Indian ocean region is a pivotal hub for global energy transportation. The contemporary era is now characterized by the power struggle in the Indo-pacific region between prominent influential. The clashing actors have endorsed and manifested approaches to deter each other a have built up strategic alliances for instance the United States inclining towards India as a strategic ally and China towards Pakistan. Therefore, each actor becoming an obstacle for the other to achieve its path of regional hegemony that is associated with the ability to influence global trade. This region has gained attention because to the shifting nature of international structure in the wake of 9/11, and IO is currently a key area of contention among superpowers. While several governments participate in IOR's balancing and rebalancing efforts, the US, China, India, and Pakistan are the most well-known and significant players. The security dilemma created through robust competition among emerging powers within the Indian Ocean region has underscored the question of 'who gets what?' As the competition radicalizes through addition of actors that participate through strategic alliances. The concerns for the balance of power are significantly important in understanding the power struggle in Indian Ocean region. (Raza, 2023)

Theoretical Framework

The pertinent lens through which the ongoing arms race in the Indian-pacific region can be scrutinized is neo-realism as in the contemporary era the region essentially embodies the struggle for power and influence, evolution and persistence of balance of power through formation of strategic alliances, and the creation of security dilemma. The theoretical framework would provide the delineation of arms race among stakeholders that encircles US, China, and India

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that reflects offensive realism and Pakistan which manifests defensive realism. Neo realism also known as structural realism transcend the confines of agent centric approaches. As, in contradiction to classical realism, the theory asserts that in viewing international relations by taking only agents and their nature into account, provides a distorted view of world politics. Therefore, the influence of structure on agent cannot be marginalized. (Valeriano, 2009)

Kenneth waltz is one of the prominent proponents of Neo-realism claiming that the anarchic international structure is the drive for the ongoing conflicts, the struggle for power relative to the other actors and existing security dilemma caused by perpetual arms race between superpowers to achieve hegemony. The contemporary international structure has compelled actors to participate in the marathon for unlimited power accumulation (offensive realism) or enough power to ensure security in an insecure structure. The theory is subdivided into two strands depending on whether states are power or security maximizers. The two offshoots of Neo realism are offensive realism and defensive realism. (Grafov, 2019)

John. J Mearsheimer, in contrast to defensive realism, asserts that states do not stop after achieving an optimum amount of power, they go beyond in terms of power accumulation and do not stop at any point. According to offensive realism, there is always a chance for conflict when there is anarchy. The essence of states is expansionist and preemptive. Power is sought after by states. States operationalize their strategy by beginning with perception and terror and then pursue specific policies that produce tangible outcomes after being swayed by a dominating perception. The primary component of the international system and the primary contributor to anarchy in international politics is military power. In the current international political system, each player needs to have offensive military weapons. Uncertainty is in the air. It indicates that no state in international politics is so confident in another state's diplomatic abilities. The only way for a state to survive is to safeguard and advance its national interests. Each state has a well-thought-out strategic plan to optimize its advantages. Offensive realism holds that nations strive for regional rather than global hegemony. Keeping in view of interests of US, China and India, the interest of each of these actors in essence holds complete influence over all other actors in the Indian Ocean region and thus the attainment of the position of hegemony in the region. US and China are engaged in a perpetual strife to attain unlimited power dominate in the region. (Mearsheimer, 2020)

According to defensive realism, state actors are considered preventative and non-expansionist in nature and feel that anarchy frequently does not present a chance for conflict. One of the prominent proponents of defensive realism, Kenneth waltz, proposed that actors are power maximizers instead they are security maximizers. For defensive realist, power is a means to an end and that 'end' is security. States strive for optimal power rather than accumulation of infinite power. It appears that states are unaffected by perception and fear based on

the manner they operationalize their strategy. States implement tangible policies and produce concrete outcomes via them. These policies, among other things, instill concrete fear, which eventually leads to a balance of power. In the pragmatic sense, states hold that offence is the greatest form of defense and defense is the best form of offence. This is the essence of both Neorealist offshoots.

The current situation in the Indian ocean can also be considered as a depiction of security dilemma. The theory of security dilemma in a pivotal lens to capture the perpetual competition between the stakeholder of Indo-pacific region in an anarchic world. It delineates logical underpinnings of political tensions and anxiety between the competing nations for security. The issue is that lowering the security of an opponent might also lower the security of the state. Reducing the adversary's security is risky since it will make him more interested in gaining greater authority to protect himself. Security can be observed as a zero-sum game characterized by the everlasting cycle of power struggle among actors and in case of Indian Ocean region US, China, India and Pakistan, followed by their action-reaction behavior. As the domination of US in the region would surely threaten China and increase its security concerns. Therefore, the anticipated stance of United States dominating the region would provide China the imperative to invest more in securing its position in the region relative to US which can be in the form of building up strategic alliances, as China builds up with Pakistan and furthermore, in reaction to this US relatively builds alliance with India making the competition fierce and manifesting the jist of prisoner's dilemma. (Taliaferro, 2001)

Research Methodology

The methodology applied to this research is qualitative in nature and encompasses documentary analysis and the research has delved into the intricacies of credible sources and analyzed detailed information about the current scenario in the Indian ocean region. The research is characterized by scrutiny of actors' behavior within the region and patterns detected that are pertinent to neo-realist perspective. Quantifiable data, factual information, and statistics are not as important as the words when it comes to qualitative research methods. The core of this approach will be the examination of human behavior, knowledge and judgement, practical application, and the responses to "How" and "Why" questions. It is clear that the quantified investigation would not allow for the thorough examination of the data and its logical interpretation. Documentary analysis is a master methodology in research put founded and endorsed by John Scott. Documentary analysis is essentially study that uses documents as data. This in essence locates and examines textual materials rather than speaking with someone to learn about their opinions or experiences. This enables us to get insight into their perspectives and experiences about the subject matter they are writing about. (Lee, 2006)

Key Stakeholders

The major powers contributing to the radical arms race taking place in the Indian Ocean region are the United States and China with their strategic allies, India and Pakistan respectively. The approach of United States in the region reflects its hegemonic interests and thus countering China. This shows both actors depicting their pertinence with Offensive realism. The position and role of India in the maritime region can be seen in two realms. In orientation with Pakistan, India seeks domination and influence over Pakistan, hence it is offensive in nature. On the other hand, in context of viewing it as a strategic ally with United States, India focuses on securing its position based on the insecurity caused by China for it. Therefore, analyzing in this orientation, India, in the Indian Ocean is defensive in terms of its approach. (Greely, 2023)

United States

With an emphasis on preserving freedom of passage and thwarting China's expanding influence, the US has refocused its strategic attention on the Indian Ocean region. In order to preserve regional peace, the US has a sizable naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific, engaging in frequent patrols and cooperative exercises with allies. When President Donald Trump visited Asia in November 2017, he outlined his vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as his nation's approach to the region. In response to China's aggressive moves, the US Indo-Pacific policy places a strong emphasis on the value of an open and free Indo-Pacific. Among other things, this entails fortifying ties with ASEAN nations, Japan, Australia, and India. The US and regional nations like India now have closer defense ties. The reflection of these alignments can be seen in Quad (quadrilateral security dialogue). With several naval and military installations in various neighboring states, the United States has maintained control in the Persian Gulf since the end of the Cold War. Therefore, maintaining its influence in the area is one of the US's main priorities. Dominating and securing in hegemonic position in the Indian Ocean would provide it the ability to control trade routes and decide who gets to do what in the region. (Ghauri, 2022)

The west has credible routes including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-al-Mendab and Suez Canal which allows it to access commodities from Asia. To keep these trade routes persistent with minimal or no threats is at the core of US interest. As a check on growing Chinese dominance in Asia, the US has an interest in preserving a close strategic alliance with India in South Asia.

China

In reaction to the Indo-US stubbornness, China has swiftly increased its naval capabilities with the goal of becoming the Indo-Pacific region's main maritime force. This involves building a variety of surface combatants, cutting-edge

submarines, and new aircraft carriers. China is proliferating its influence and naval reach by building major ports and infrastructure in important places around the Indian Ocean as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Regional tensions have increased because of China's strategic response in the South China Sea, which includes the militarization of manmade islands and highlights its strategic objectives. China's interest, at its core holds economic and strategic goal. The biggest user of natural gas and oil is China. Imports from several IO littoral states provide over 70% of its oil needs and 52% of its gas needs. Additionally, IO, where the Chinese have no naval presence, handles 80% of their commerce. China is exposed in times of crisis due to India's and America's significant involvement in these waterways. One of the economies with the greatest rates of growth is China, which is simultaneously strengthening its military to solidify its place in the world power structure. Power projection is therefore a key goal for boosting impact in IOR. Additionally, Pakistan's deep water Gwadar sea port will provide Beijing the quickest and safest routes for its energy imports, and China hopes to support Pakistan as a counterbalance to India. Therefore, strategic alliance with Pakistan would allow China to achieve its hegemonic and balancing objectives. (Saeed, 2020)

India

Appreciating its strategic importance, the largest state in IO is India, which has a 72,500-kilometer coastline, an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 2 million square kilometers, and is the guardian of more than 1200 islands. India has long aimed to become a dominating force in the IOR given its geographical location. Another key goal of India is to prevent extra-regional nations from establishing a significant presence in the area. In order to check China's influence in the region, India took a prominent step by forming strategic partnerships with other emerged and emerging power including US and Japan respectively. These partnerships were manifested in the form of Quad (Quadrilateral security dialogue). India's increased inclination towards ASEAN states, lies at the jist of it's 'act east' policy that has contributed to proliferating naval presence of India in the IO region. Given that the Gulf States provide the majority of India's energy needs and that there is a sizable Indian diaspora in the region, this area is crucial to Indian interests, and the country hopes to strengthen its political, diplomatic, and security clout there. Over 80 percent of India's trade goes via IO. The US is using India as a bulwark against China's expanding naval might. India is actively improving its naval capabilities as a revisionist power, concentrating on cutting-edge weapons, surveillance, and intelligence systems, through both domestic production and international purchases.

Two active aircraft carriers, INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant, are important assets, while a third, INS Vishal, is being developed. INS Arihant (S2) is India's sole nuclear-powered ballistic submarine (SSBN) at the moment. S3 (INS Arighat) is currently in development. India has established itself as a provider of net

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security by dramatically increasing its marine assets in the Indian Ocean. It signs defense deals and extends credit lines to littoral and island countries, maintaining close military and economic relations. India purchases hardware and technology from nations such as the US and Russia, including US-made P-8I maritime surveillance aircraft which has resulted in enhancement of India's defense in the maritime region. (Rehman, 2024)

Pakistan

In the battle for dominance between emerged and emerging powers, Pakistan has been forcefully positioned in a critical situation with India being a key adversary in the region and its alliance with a superpower. United States has been perceived as an anticipated threat of increased insecurity. Therefore, at the top of the list of Pakistan's national interest in the Indian Ocean region are security concerns and a strong defense strategy to counter any future threat. Pakistan is concerned by India's naval buildup and is working to update its own fleet to preserve regional dominance. Even while India's nuclear submarine is intended to confront China, Pakistan is equally alarmed by this assertive Indian action and perceives it as a greater danger because of the two countries' long-standing hostility. The Pakistani side has been especially hurt by the resulting second-strike capabilities, and this action has made Pakistan's security situation with India worse by upsetting the strategic equilibrium between the two South Asian foes. To strengthen its strategic deterrent capabilities, Pakistan has made investments to expand its submarine fleet, including purchasing cutting-edge submarines from China. Therefore, a strategic alliance with China can provide Pakistan the weapon to mitigate its security threat. (Khan)

The Framework for Strategic Equilibrium and Deterrence in the India Ocean

The pivotal tenet of national security policy, deterrence, is a complex idea that may be summed up as the expected cost of reprisal for an unwanted conduct that exceeds any possible advantages. Deterrence dynamics are especially composite in the IOR, and the "Stability-Instability Paradox," first articulated by Glenn Snyder, is still relevant given the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China, India's pursuit of BMD, the Indo-US nuclear deal, access to cutting-edge technologies, advancements in space and missile technology, the emergence of the newest technologies, and the conceptual paradigm of Cross Domain Deterrence. Strategic stability is now under jeopardy due to the hybrid threat environment combined with developing technology. (Tarapore, 2020)

The orientation of conflict can either manifest hegemony or balance of power, according to the theory of regional security complex articulated by Barry Buzan. In broader aspect the emphasis of regional environment is pivotal. The IOR is

changing from a security regime, where there are some security guarantees, to a conflict creation situation where there are none. Hegemonic-objective conflict is thus a defining feature of the regional environment in IOR. In response to this, a contradictory notion detente is presented. The situation in IOR is typified by non-aggressive/non-transparent nuclear doctrine, asymmetric conventional force differential, and mutual antagonism. These are the elements that the equation (détente) is missing. Strategic stability and détente are at a crossroads as provocative expansions, hegemonistic plans, the newest disruptive technologies, a nuclear arsenal, and other force multipliers are rejecting conceptions of deterrence. (Thorpe, 2019)

Integration of AI and New Technology in Strategic Dynamics

Rapid technology breakthroughs have had a significant influence on military and strategic issues in the twenty-first century. It is often known that preserving geopolitical stability has always depended heavily on technical progress. Strategic stability is being impacted by changing technology, and new fields are progressively attempting to replace strategic and nuclear capabilities. As military capabilities (space, cyberspace, land, air, and sea) increase in the twenty-first century, nations in the IOR will need to invest heavily in the acquisition and development of cutting-edge technology to achieve perfect deterrence. To achieve strategic stability, the expense of these expenditures would force these countries to seek international cooperation, which might lead to a shift in the area towards a political-military-economic paradigm. These new technologies have the potential to revolutionize the game and modify the current strategic equation as they spread. They can even weaken military advantages, operate as leverage for some countries, and level the playing field for others. (Jilani, 2024)

AI is anticipated to have a multifaceted application. AI has uses in the military as well as in information technology, healthcare, and auto manufacture. AI is still in its Early stages of development and raises questions about competence, ethics, and weapons control. Even though AI works well at the tactical and operational levels, it is anticipated to have a big impact at the strategic level. These effects could include shifting the balance of power, reducing risk, and favoring offensive action, influencing the whole spectrum of violence, and managing entire military operations. AI is essential to the idea of Net-Centric Warfare, which uses all linked devices as information and action platforms, including radars, sensors, weapons, drones, ships, airplanes, satellites, and human sources. Since nations' strategic force structures have an impact on AI's capabilities, it cannot be completely trusted or depended upon. Disinformation produced by AI has the potential to have major strategic repercussions, as cyber threats continue to jeopardize the security of AI systems. AI may be used as a leveraging tool or as a force multiplier in the context of deterrence. AI is predicted to be used as the software to strengthen or weaken nuclear weapons and other weapon systems, which will continue to act as deterrents. (Hussain, 2024)

Neo-Liberal Pathways

The Neo-liberal approach on the Indian Ocean provides a blueprint for stakeholders that maps out practical actions including multilateral security dialogues, regional arms control agreements, confidence building measures and integration of track 2 diplomacy to achieve foreign policy objectives. These Neo-liberal pathways reflect prioritization of communication and dialogue which consequents in fostering trust and compatibility. This framework aims to mitigate security threats through cooperation rather than competition. The Indian Ocean naval symposium (IONS) is one of the platforms that depicts this approach vividly. Since joining the forum in 2014, Pakistan has made use of it to collaborate with other countries' naval forces. (Owais, 2020)

Misunderstandings and accidental conflicts in this critical situation where all actors are developed militarily and have the capability to use these arms can result in deteriorating consequences and destruction in the Indian Ocean region. In order to counter such anticipated threat requires the endorsement of confidence building measures. Discussions are vital to reach agreements on weapons control that are especially suited for the Indian Ocean area. In order to provide a secure environment in the Indian Ocean area, bilateral and multilateral accords limiting nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, and other strategic assets are essential. Furthermore, the endorsement of track II diplomacy that encompasses non-governmental discussions including civil society, think tanks, and academics. Plan seminars, conferences, and exchange initiatives with an emphasis on regional stability and marine security. (Lodgaard, 2019)

Conclusion

A complicated and fascinating sequence of conflict and collaboration resulted from changing geopolitical struggle in the Indian Ocean. To combat perceived unfavorable grouping, many regional and extra-regional forces are actively working together by forming strategic alliances. For instance, the United States inclining towards India and, on the other hand China allying with Pakistan. The Indo-US and Pak-China nexus is the prominent appearance on the stage of Indian Ocean struggling to achieve their respective interests in the region. The reality that opposing forces are playing a zero-sum game makes the policy approaches previously mentioned clear. On the other hand, big nations must pursue shared interests due to the modern globalized international system and universal concerns about the safety and security of marine trade and traffic.

Pakistan and India are significant regional actors, while China and America are key global powers. A thorough grasp of the underlying dynamics is necessary since the arms race and strategic competition in the Indian Ocean area represent serious threats to regional security. The analysis of Indian Ocean emphasizes the security conundrum, in which governments' attempts to strengthen security by

increasing their fleets result in heightened tensions and retaliatory actions, thereby sustaining the arms race. The use of neo-realism sheds light on how regional instability is made worse by hegemonic aspirations and power shifts among important actors. The study promotes neo-liberal cooperative security frameworks that emphasize the function of international organizations, methods to foster confidence, and economic interdependence to solve these issues. By putting these neo-liberal tactics into practice, the Indian Ocean area may be able to reduce the likelihood of war and advance long-term strategic stability.

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