BHARATI INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (BIJMRD)

(Open Access Peer-Reviewed International Journal)

DOI Link : https://doi.org/10.70798/Bijmrd/04090003

Available Online: www.bijmrd.com | BIJMRD Volume: 4 | Issue: 09 | September 2026 | e-ISSN: 2584-1890

The Indian Ocean and the New Geopolitics of South Asia : Strategic Competition, Maritime Security and Regional Power Politics

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Abstract: *The Indian Ocean has emerged as one of the most strategically significant maritime spaces in contemporary international politics, particularly because of its central position in global trade, energy transportation, connectivity and regional security. Maritime transport carries more than 80% of goods traded worldwide by volume, making the security and stability of major maritime routes an important component of the international Political economy. The geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean has increased further with the growing strategic presence of India and China and the expanding involvement of smaller South Asian States such as Sri-Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan. China's economic and strategic engagement through the Belt and Road Initiatives, including infrastructure projects and maritime connectivity initiatives, has generated both economic opportunities and strategic concerns in the region. At the same time, India has sought to strengthen its maritime position through initiatives such as Security and Growth for All in the region (SAGAR), maritime domain awareness, naval diplomacy and regional maritime partnerships. Existing debated frequently interpret these developments primarily through the framework of India-China strategic rivalry. This article argues that such a framework, while important, does not fully capture the complexity of contemporary Indian Ocean politics. The study therefore examines the interaction between great-power competition, smaller-state strategic autonomy, traditional and non-traditional maritime-security challenges, and regional institutional cooperation. Using a qualitative research design and documentary analysis of official documents, international reports, scholarly literature and policy materials, the article finds that the emerging Indian Ocean order is characterised not simply by rivalry but by a combination of competition, cooperation, strategic hedging and Institutionalisation. It argues that sustainable regional stability requires strengthening cooperative maritime-security mechanism while preventing strategic competition from developing into confrontation.*

Keywords: *Indian Ocean, South Asia, Maritime Security, India-China Competition, Regional Power Politics.*

Introduction: The maritime domain has become an increasingly important arena of contemporary international politics. The growing interdependence of national economics, the expansion of global supply chains and the strategic importance of Maritime transportation have made oceans central to both economic security and geopolitical competition. Maritime Transport carries more than 80% of goods traded globally by volume and remains fundamental to the functioning of global value chains. Consequently, the security of sea lines of communication, ports, maritime infrastructure and strategic chokepoints has acquired significance extending well beyond traditional naval affairs. Contemporary maritime politics increasingly connects economic connectivity with questions of national security, strategic autonomy and regional power

distribution Geopolitical tensions, conflicts and disruptions to shipping routes have further demonstrated the vulnerability of global trade to instability in the maritime domain. UNCTAD's Review of Maritime Transport 2025, for example, emphasises the geopolitical developments are reshaping shipping routes and increasing uncertainty and costs within the global maritime economy. Within this broader transformation, the Indian Ocean occupies a particularly important position. Geographically linking the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean provides access to some of the world's most significant commercial and energy routes. Its strategic importance is enhanced by its proximity to major energy-producing regions and by its connection with important maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and the approaches to the Malacca Strait. The region is consequently not merely a geographical space but an important strategic environment in which economic interests, military capabilities, connectivity projects and diplomatic relationships intersect. For the countries of South Asia, the Indian Ocean has therefore become increasingly important for economic development, energy security, trade and national defence.

The changing geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean is particularly visible in the growing interaction between India and China. Both countries have experienced significant economic and strategic expansion and increasingly regard the maritime domain as important to their border National interest. David Brewster's influential work argues that India and China are emerging as major Maritime powers whose interests increasingly intersect across the Indian Ocean and wider Indo-Pacific. He further observes that the relationship between the two powers in this maritime space may involve cooperation, coexistence, competition or confrontation, making their interaction one of the major strategic questions for the region. The competition is not limited to navel capabilities. It also involves infrastructure, ports, connectivity, diplomatic influence, maritime surveillance, economic partnerships and competing visions of regional order. China's growing engagement in the Indian Ocean is closely associated with its broader Belt and Road Initiative and its maritime connectivity ambitions. Chinese investment and infrastructure projects in South Asia have extended Beijing's economic presence and generated new networks of connectivity. The Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is one of the most frequently discussed example. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China Merchants Port Holding acquired an 85% share in the Hambantota International Port Group under a 99-year concession agreement concluded in 2017. The port is located closes to the major east-west shipping route connecting the Suez Canal and Malacca Strait. Such developments have generated strategic debate in India and elsewhere concerning the potential long-term implications of China's maritime presence. However, it is analytically important not to equate every Chinese commercial investment with the establishment of a military base. The strategic significance of such infrastructure depends upon its ownership structure, operational use, host-country policies, logistical arrangements and the broader evolution of Chinese maritime capabilities.

India, meanwhile, has increasingly sought to strengthen its role as a major maritime power and security provider in the Indian Ocean. India's maritime approach has increasingly emphasised the principle of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and has been supported by naval diplomacy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime surveillance, capacity building and cooperation with Indian Ocean countries. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and other regional mechanisms provide platforms through which India and other regional states seek to promote maritime cooperation. The contemporary geopolitical environment, however, cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of India-China rivalry. Smaller and medium-sized South Asian states occupy strategically significant positions and possess their own economic, security and diplomatic interests. Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan have each developed relationships with India and China in ways that reflect domestic political priorities, economic requirements and calculations. These states are not simply passive objects of competition between major powers. Rather, they often seek to diversify partnerships and maximise economic and strategic benefits while protecting their sovereignty and policy autonomy. Their behaviour can therefore be examined through the concept of strategic hedging, whereby

states avoid complete alignment with one major power and instead maintain relationships with multiple actors. At the same time, maritime security in the Indian Ocean encompasses much more than traditional military competition. Piracy, terrorism, trafficking, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, maritime pollution, climate-related risks and humanitarian emergencies constitute important non-traditional security challenges. IORA's maritime-safety and security framework, for example, emphasises search and rescue, maritime partnerships, maritime crime and information sharing as important areas of regional cooperation. These challenges demonstrate that even states with different geopolitical interests have incentives to cooperate.

However, the present article examines the changing geopolitics of the Indian Ocean through three interconnected dimensions: strategic competition, maritime security and regional power politics. It argues that the emerging Indian Ocean order should not be understood simply as a zero-sum contest between India and China. Instead, it is characterised by simultaneous competition and cooperation, in which great-power rivalry interacts with the strategic choices of smaller states, economic interdependence and regional institutional mechanism. The article consequently seeks to understand how these different processes are reshaping the political and security architecture of South Asia.

Statement of the Problem: The Indian Ocean is increasingly emerging as a critical arena in the changing distribution of power in South Asia because of its strategic location, economic significance and importance for maritime security and regional connectivity. The region connects major energy-producing areas of the Middle East with the rapidly growing economies of South and Southeast Asia and contains vital sea lines of communication and strategic maritime routes. Consequently, the growing involvement of major powers, particularly India and China, has introduced new dimensions of geopolitical competition involving ports, infrastructure, connectivity projects, naval capabilities, maritime surveillance and diplomatic influence. This development creates a complex strategic dilemma for smaller South Asian States, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan, which seek to benefit from external investment, infrastructure and security partnerships while simultaneously protecting their sovereignty, strategic autonomy and national interests. The problem is further complicated by the tendency to interpret Indian Ocean geopolitics predominantly through the framework of India – China rivalry. Although strategic competition between the two major powers is an important feature of the regional security environment, an exclusive focus on their rivalry may overlook the agency and strategic choices of smaller states as well as the growing importance of non-traditional maritime-security challenges. Contemporary maritime security extends beyond conventional naval competition to include piracy, maritime terrorism, trafficking, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, marine pollution, climate-related risks and humanitarian emergencies, many of which require collective responses rather than unilateral military measures. Moreover regional mechanisms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) seek to promote maritime cooperation, information sharing, search and rescue and maritime partnerships, indicating the simultaneous presence of competition and cooperation in the region. The central problem addressed by this study is therefore the tension between strategic competition and the necessity of regional cooperation. It seeks to understand whether an inclusive and cooperative maritime order can emerge in the Indian Ocean while major powers compete for strategic influence and smaller South Asian states attempt to preserve their autonomy and maximise the benefits of multiple external partnerships.

Review of Literature: Literature on Indian Ocean geopolitics focuses on maritime power, India -China competition, China's economic and maritime initiatives, India's security responses and the strategic choices of smaller states. While classical theories such as Alfred Thayer Mahan's emphasis on sea power remain relevant, contemporary influence also depends on ports, infrastructure, shipping routes, surveillance, logistics and connectivity projects.

Devid Brewster (2018) examines India-China Competition through status, legitimacy and regional influence. He argues that rivalry reflects not only material capabilities but also competing perceptions of each country's legitimate role. However, his analysis gives limited attention to smaller South Asian states.

Jingdong Yuan (2018) explores China's growing presence and India's responses. Yuan argues that competition can be managed through communication and appropriate policies, offering a perspective that emphasises coexistence rather than inevitable conflict. Nevertheless, the role of smaller states and regional institutions receives limited attention.

Darshana M. Baruah (2018) examines India's effort to improve surveillance, information sharing and maritime monitoring. Her work shows that maritime security depends not only on naval strength but also on access to reliable information. However, it largely reflects India's perspective.

Jabin T.Jacob (2018) analyses China's Maritime Silk Road and its links to infrastructure, ports and connectivity. His study demonstrates how economic projects can acquire geopolitical significance while cautioning against viewing them solely through economic or military perspectives.

Zhu Li (2018) highlights differing Chinese and Indian interpretations of the Maritime Silk Road. China stresses economic connectivity, while India often views the initiative through a security lens. This "cognitive divergence" shows how perceptions shape geopolitical competition and cooperation.

Studies of Hambantota and Gwadar ports further demonstrate the strategic importance of Maritime infrastructure. Although commercial projects may have dual- use potential, they should not automatically be equated with military bases. Their significance depends on location, ownership, connectivity and actual military use. Recent studies also recognises that smaller states such as Sri-Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh are not passive participants in India – China rivalry. They pursue their own interest by diversifying partnership and balancing relations with major powers. Concepts such as strategic autonomy, balancing and hedging help explain these choices. The Literature further identifies both traditional and non-traditional maritime-security challenges, including naval rivalry, piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, environmental degradation, disasters and humanitarian emergencies. These challenges require information sharing, law enforcement, search and rescue cooperation and regional coordination through institutions such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). However, existing studies provides important insights into maritime power, India -China competition, the Maritime Silk Road, maritime domain awareness and infrastructure. The greater attention is needed to the combined role of major powers, smaller South Asian states, non traditional security challenges and regional institutions. This study addresses that gap by examining the Indian Ocean as a space where competition a d cooperation occur simultaneously.

Research Gap: Existing literature provides substantial insights into India -China maritime cooperation, China's Maritime Silk Road India's maritime security strategy and strategic significance of ports such as Hambantota and Gwadar. However, much of the studies examines the Indian Ocean primarily through the lens of great power rivalry. This approach may understate the strategic agency of smaller South Asian states, which actively diversify partnerships and pursue their own national interests. Moreover, traditional strategic competition is often examined separately from non- traditional maritime security challenges such as piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, environmental threats and humanitarian emergencies. Limited attention has also been given to how regional institutions contribute to managing these interconnected challenges. Therefore, the principal gap is analytically and integrative. This study addresses the gap by examining the Indian Ocean as a multidimensional regional political space where India-China Competition, smaller state strategic choices, maritime security challenges and regional cooperation interact. It thereby moves beyond a simple India-versus-China framework to understand the emerging maritime order in South Asia.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the changing geopolitical significance of the Indian ocean in contemporary South Asia.
2. To analyse the nature and implication of strategic competition between India and China in in the Indian Ocean.
3. To examines the traditional and non-traditional Maritime securities challenges affecting the region.
4. To assesses the role of regional cooperation mechanisms in promoting maritime security and strategic stability.

Research Questions:

1. How has the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean changed in contemporary South Asia ?
2. How does India-China strategic competition influence the regional maritime security environment?
3. What are the major traditional and non-traditional maritime-security challenges confronting the Indian Ocean region?
4. To what extent can regional cooperation mechanisms contribute to maritime security and strategic stability?

Research Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design to examine the changing geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and its implications for South Asian regional politics. A qualitative approach is suitable because the study focuses on understanding strategic behaviour, geopolitical developments, policy decisions, maritime security concerns and regional cooperation rather than measuring statistical relationships. The study is based mainly on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government publications, reports of international organisations, regional institutional documents and relevant policy reports. Important sources include publications and documents of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Government of India, Indian Navy and other relevant national and international institutions.

Academic literature on Indian -China Maritime relations, the maritime Silk Road, Maritime security and regional geopolitics is also used to develop the theoretical and analytical understanding of the study. The study uses documentary analysis and qualitative content analysis to examine the selected materials. The collected information is organised around four major themes: strategic competition, maritime security, regional power politics and institutional cooperation. Strategic competition includes naval activities, strategic infrastructure, connectivity projects and diplomatic partnerships. Maritime security covers both traditional concerns, such as naval competition and military presence, and non-traditional concerns, including piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, pollution, disasters and humanitarian emergencies Regional power politics examines the interaction among India, China and smaller South Asian States, while institutional cooperation focuses on regional mechanisms such as IORA, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and other Maritime initiatives. The study mainly covers the period 2015-2026, which captures important developments in the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese infrastructure engagement, India's maritime initiatives and regional maritime security cooperation. India, China, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan are examined as illustrative cases because of their geographical location and strategic relevance to the Indian Ocean. The study therefore seeks to provide a broader understanding of how competition and cooperation are shaping the emerging maritime order in South Asia.

Finding and discussion: The first major finding of the study is that the Indian Ocean has emerged as a major geopolitical and economic space rather than being only a geographical or commercial region. Its importance is closely connected with the growing dependence of international trade on maritime routes.

UNCTAD reports that more than 80% of global merchandise trade by volume is carried by sea, while its recent reports also show that geopolitical tensions are changing shipping routes, increasing transport costs and creating greater uncertainty in global maritime trade. The Indian Ocean is particularly important because it connects the energy-producing regions of the Middle East with the major economies of South and Southeast Asia and provides access towards Europe and Africa. Its strategic location therefore gives the region importance for both coastal and external powers. The study finds that this economic importance has increasingly become connected with strategic competition. Ports, shipping routes, never development surveillance system connectivity projects and Maritime infrastructure are now important parts of regional power politics. The rise of the wider Indo -Pacific framework has further increased the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean by connecting developments in the Indian Ocean with wider Maritime developments in the Pacific. Therefore, control, protection and access to Maritime routes have become important elements of national and regional Security. At the same time, the study finds that maritime power can no longer be understood only in terms of naval strength. Economic investment, infrastructure, connectivity, maritime awareness, technology and the ability to provide maritime services are also becoming important sources of influence.

The second major finding concerns India-China strategic competition, which is an important feature of the changing Indian Ocean order but does not explain the entire regional situation. Both countries have strong economic and strategic interests in the region. China depends heavily on maritime routes for trade and energy supplies, while India's geographical position places the Indian Ocean directly within its wider security environment. The competition therefore involves naval capabilities, maritime surveillance, strategic partnerships, infrastructure, connectivity and diplomatic influence. The literature reviewed in this study shows that differences in perceptions of status, legitimacy and regional roles contribute to India-China competition. Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly in strategically located countries, have received considerable attention in India and elsewhere. The case of Hambantota is important because the IMF records that China Merchants Port Holdings acquired an 85 per cent share in the Hambantota International Port Group under a 99-year concession agreement in 2017, with the port located close to the major east-west shipping route linking the Suez Canal and Malacca Strait. However, the study finds that Chinese commercial infrastructure should not automatically be described as military expansion. Commercial ports, strategic access and military bases are different categories, and their actual significance must be assessed through evidence of operational use, military deployment and host-state arrangements. India's response has also increasingly combined maritime capability with regional cooperation. The 2026 IOS SAGAR initiative involved personnel from 16 IONS countries and focused on training, interoperability and maritime cooperation, showing that India's maritime response includes partnership and capacity building as well as strategic presence. Thus, India-China relations in the Indian Ocean can be understood as a mixture of competition, interdependence and limited opportunities for cooperation rather than as an unavoidable path towards direct confrontation.

The third finding is that smaller South Asian states are active participants in Indian Ocean geopolitics and should not be treated simply as passive areas of India-China rivalry. Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan have different geographical positions, political systems, economic needs and security interests, and their foreign-policy choices are shaped by these domestic and national priorities. Sri Lanka demonstrates the complexity of this situation particularly well. Chinese infrastructure involvement provides economic and connectivity opportunities, while relations with India remain important because of geographical proximity, trade, security and political links. Therefore, Sri Lanka's foreign-policy behaviour cannot be adequately explained as a simple shift towards either China or India. It is better understood as strategic diversification, where the country attempts to maintain relationships with different external powers according to its interests. Maldives also demonstrates how domestic political changes can influence its external relationships because of its strategically important location in the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh similarly maintains important economic and infrastructural relations with China while retaining strong geographical, economic and

security connections with India. Pakistan represents a somewhat different case because of its deeper relationship with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar, but it also has wider maritime and regional interests. These cases show that smaller states possess bargaining power and strategic agency. Their ability to engage different major powers creates a more complex regional environment and prevents the Indian Ocean from becoming a simple India-China bipolar system. The study therefore finds that strategic hedging and diversification by smaller states are important features of the emerging regional order.

The fourth finding is that maritime security in the Indian Ocean is becoming increasingly multidimensional and requires both competition management and regional cooperation. Traditional security concerns such as naval competition, military deployments, submarine activity, surveillance and strategic ports remain important, but they exist alongside piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, pollution, climate-related risks, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. These non-traditional challenges often cross national boundaries and cannot be effectively addressed by one country alone. Recent Indian Navy material also identifies piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking and natural disasters among the shared maritime challenges requiring coordinated responses. Regional institutions and maritime partnerships are therefore becoming increasingly important. IORA provides a platform for cooperation in areas such as maritime safety, search and rescue, maritime crime and information sharing, while IONS and initiatives such as IOS SAGAR provide opportunities for practical naval cooperation and capacity building. The 2026 IOS SAGAR deployment, involving 16 partner countries, demonstrates how training, interoperability, professional exchanges and joint maritime engagement can strengthen regional cooperation. However, the study also finds that regional institutions cannot eliminate strategic competition between major powers. Their more realistic role is to reduce misunderstanding, build trust, improve information sharing and support cooperation in areas of common interest. Taken together, the findings show that the emerging Indian Ocean regional order is shaped by four connected processes: strategic competition between major powers, strategic hedging by smaller states, growing non-traditional maritime-security challenges and increasing regional cooperation. Therefore, the future of the Indian Ocean is unlikely to be determined by one dominant power alone; rather, it will be shaped by the continuing interaction between competition, cooperation, national interests and regional institutions.

Conclusion: The Indian Ocean has become one of the most important geopolitical spaces in contemporary South Asia. Its importance arises from the interaction of geography, maritime trade, energy transportation, strategic connectivity and national security. The fact that maritime transport carries more than 80% of global goods trade by volume demonstrates why the stability of maritime routes has consequences extending far beyond naval affairs. This study has argued that the new geopolitics of the Indian Ocean cannot be adequately explained through a simple India-China rivalry framework. India and China are undoubtedly central actors and their growing maritime capabilities, infrastructure initiatives and strategic partnerships have transformed the regional balance. However, their competition occurs within a broader political environment involving Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other Indian Ocean states. These countries possess their own interests and increasingly employ strategic hedging and diversified partnerships to preserve economic and diplomatic autonomy.

India's recent maritime initiatives, including IOS SAGAR, indicate a growing emphasis on practical cooperation and capacity building among Indian Ocean Countries. However, regional cooperation will remain difficult unless major and smaller powers recognise that maritime security cannot be achieved solely through military competition. The emerging Indian Ocean order is consequently best understood as a hybrid regional order on which strategic rivalry and cooperation coexist. The future stability of South Asia will depend not on eliminating competition but on managing it through confidence-building, institutional dialogue, information sharing, respect for international law and cooperation on common maritime

challenges. A stable Indian Ocean therefore requires a balance between strategic deterrence and cooperation security, with smaller states playing an active role in shaping the regional order.

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Citation: **Debnath. R.,** (2026) "The Indian Ocean and the New Geopolitics of South Asia : Strategic Competition, Maritime Security and Regional Power Politics", *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-4, Issue-09, September-2026.