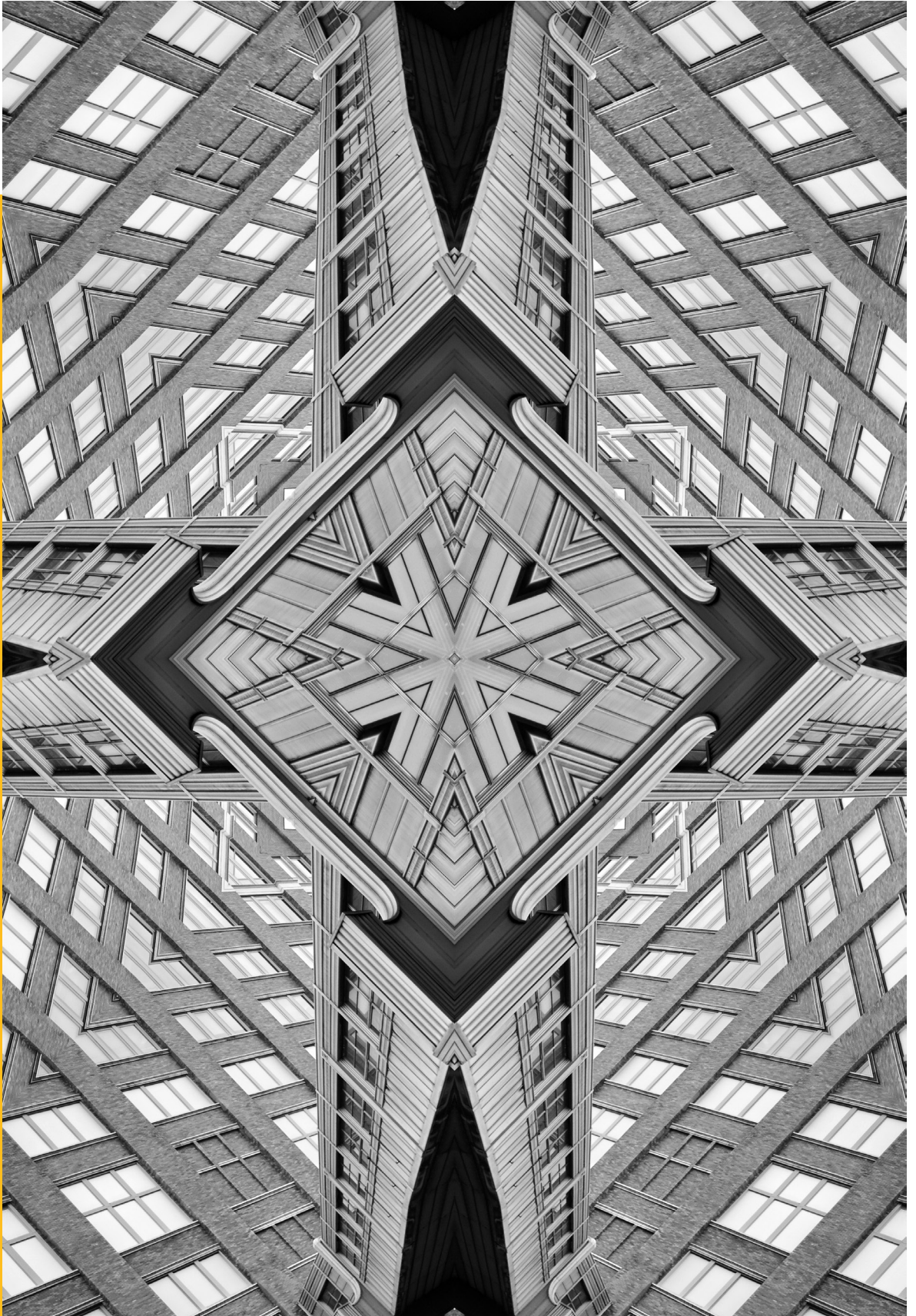


# Occasional Paper



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# Dominance, Competition, and Adaptation: The US Quest for a Strategic Trifecta in the Indian Ocean

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## **Abstract**

The United States (US) is recalibrating its strategy in the Indian Ocean, driven by the region's rapidly evolving geopolitical and geostrategic landscape. The US approach has moved from unilateral dominance to a more collaborative strategy that emphasises shared leadership through a technology-driven security paradigm. This paradigm supports a rule-based order where regional stakeholders are empowered to adopt more significant roles. The foundational agreements between the US and India reflect this strategic shift, highlighting a partnership that prioritises regional stability over traditional power projection. The rise of minilateral frameworks such as the Quad have also become central to the US strategy. This paper analyses how the Indian Ocean fits into the US's broader assertion as a regional power.

The United States (US) has maintained strategic interests in the Indian Ocean since the Cold War era, with these interests evolving over time. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, US involvement was centred around the Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR)<sup>a</sup> established in 1949, which led to the creation of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain in 1995. This anchoring of US strategy in the Gulf region highlighted the Indian Ocean's importance as a strategic maritime corridor. Despite the absence of other great powers actively competing for influence, the Indian Ocean became one of the most nuclearised seas during the Cold War, with a high number of US and Soviet submarines operating beneath its surface.<sup>1</sup>

Post-Second World War decolonisation, particularly the loss of India as Britain's largest colony in 1947 and Britain's dwindling military capacities abroad and the lack of political will at home, a power vacuum was created in the mid- to late-1960s in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The US seized the opportunity, expanding its strategic foothold through the British Indian Ocean Territory at Diego Garcia. As the US increased its engagement in the Gulf to protect its oil interests, Diego Garcia became a pivotal military facility, allowing the US to project power across the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup>

Tensions peaked in 1971 during the Indo-Pakistani War, when the US and Soviet Union were drawn into a standoff, with the US deploying naval assets to the Bay of Bengal in a show of force against India, which was backed by the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> The late 1970s further escalated US-Soviet rivalry in the Indian Ocean, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought Soviet forces uncomfortably close to the Indian Ocean littorals, prompting the US to assert its strategic interests through the Carter Doctrine.<sup>b</sup> In his 1980 State of the Union address, President Jimmy Carter declared that, if needed, the US would use military force to defend its interests in the Persian Gulf, underscoring the region's importance to US security strategy.

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a Short for Middle East Force (MEF), it succeeded the Persian Gulf Command at Jufayr and represented US naval interests in the region comprising of a few ships led by a flag ship. In 1971, the MEF established a base in Bahrain, and in 1983, the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) was formed from US Central Command, to further enhance US commitment to regional security.

b The Carter Doctrine was a policy proclaimed by then US President Jimmy Carter in his State of the Union Address: "Any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States." Such attempts "will be repelled by the use of any means necessary including military force."

# Introduction



Despite these assertive policies, US presence in Diego Garcia—which was officially designated as a Military Support Facility—remained relatively low-profile. Concurrent efforts by Indian Ocean littoral states, led by Sri Lanka, to establish the region as a ‘Zone of Peace’ were aimed at limiting great-power competition. While this did not stop the proliferation of US and Soviet submarines, it created an ideological barrier against overt militarisation, limiting US ability to fully project military power in the region. The geographical distance from the US mainland further dampened America’s strategic focus on the Indian Ocean, with US interests remaining sporadic and primarily reactive to broader geopolitical shifts until 1995 when the US Fifth Fleet was revived.

The early 21<sup>st</sup> century marked a shift in US engagement in the IOR. As US energy dependence on the Gulf declined and West Asia became increasingly destabilised by the war on terror, the Indian Ocean's strategic value for the US increased. Consequently, the US began seeking partnerships in the IOR to counterbalance Chinese influence in the region. India emerged as a natural partner due to its democratic values and strategic location as well as its alignment with US efforts to carve a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. The changing dynamics in the Asia-Pacific, including the challenges posed by Pakistan's growing terrorism and shifting US alliances, reinforced this alignment. Simultaneously, new security threats such as piracy emerged, particularly off the coast of Somalia, disrupting critical shipping lanes in the western Indian Ocean. This challenge prompted the US to adopt a multilateral approach to maritime security, leading to the formation of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)—a coalition of over 45 nations aimed at ensuring peace and stability in the region. While India initially was not part of this framework, it nevertheless aimed to secure the southern and eastern Indian Ocean in accordance with its Look East and Act East policies.<sup>c</sup> Today, US interests in the Indian Ocean have expanded and diversified. The US Quadrennial Defence Review of 2010<sup>d</sup> recentred the US focus to the IOR.<sup>d</sup>

Key US allies such as Australia and Japan also began to reassess their role in the Indian Ocean, building on the post-2004 tsunami Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) collaboration in the Indian Ocean between Australia, Japan, India, and the US.<sup>5</sup> Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper stated that the Indian Ocean will assume centrality in the country's strategic assessment in the areas of maritime security and defence planning.<sup>6</sup>

While direct military dominance is not the primary goal, the US seeks a favourable balance of power that empowers regional partners like India to counter Chinese influence. China's assertive posture in the region presents

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c The Look East Policy, initiated in 1992, was designed as an economic strategy to strengthen India's trade and investment ties with Southeast Asia. In 2014, the Act East Policy was introduced to build upon this foundation, broadening its scope to encompass economic, strategic, and cultural engagement with the wider Asia-Pacific region at multiple levels.

d It stated, "The United States has a substantial interest in the stability of the Indian Ocean region as a whole, which will play an ever more important role in the global economy. The Indian Ocean provides vital sea lines of communication that are essential to global commerce, international energy security, and regional stability. Ensuring open access to the Indian Ocean will require a more integrated approach to the region across military and civilian organizations."

a strategic challenge for the US, necessitating a collaborative, multilateral approach that combines military and economic strategies. The US now emphasises regional partnerships to maintain freedom of navigation, secure supply chains, and uphold a rules-based order, reflecting a shift from its Cold War-era hard power to a more nuanced, cooperative strategy.

As a strategic corridor linking the manufacturing hubs of China, India, and Southeast Asia with Europe and the broader Western markets, the Indian Ocean is central to global trade and security. The Indian Ocean is now considered the western flank of the broader Indo-Pacific strategy, with the US integrating it into a wider framework of regional security doctrines that blend unilateral capabilities with multilateral cooperation. As such, the US has moved from a stance of direct intervention to one that seeks to shape the regional security architecture through partnerships with like-minded nations. India's emergence as a key player in this evolving framework underscores the importance of its leadership in maintaining a stable and balanced regional order. Thus, US strategy in the Indian Ocean continues to adapt to the changing geopolitical landscape, emphasising shared interests, mutual respect for sovereignty, and the promotion of free and open maritime commons.

The current US approach is characterised by a commitment to multilateralism<sup>7</sup> through a recognition of the historical sensitivities of the region to great-power competition. This is reinforced by recent seismic events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the Israel-Hamas war, which have underscored the importance of secure and predictable supply chains for global commerce.

The US and China have entered a fierce competition for augmenting their naval capacities. While the US retains a projection advantage over China, the latter appears to be dominating in “using quantity to build quality”<sup>8</sup> for its navy. By 2020, China had surpassed the US in the number of battle force ships, with over 370 platforms; the fleet is expected to grow to 435 ships by 2030.<sup>9</sup> The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is now considered as the only navy that could challenge the dominance of the US Navy in the wartime control of the western Pacific.<sup>10</sup>

# The Indian Ocean in the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The US now identifies itself as an Indo-Pacific power, placing the Indian Ocean at the core of its interests in Asia.<sup>11</sup> Two-way trade between the US and the Indo-Pacific region amounted to nearly US\$1.75 trillion in 2020, with foreign direct investments from the region to the US approaching US\$1 trillion in 2024.<sup>12</sup> As the US navigates its role in the Indo-Pacific, it needs to address a crucial question, as outlined in the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy: How can the US sustain its strategic leadership in the region, promote a liberal economic order, prevent China from establishing new authoritarian spheres of influence, and simultaneously foster cooperation to enhance regional peace and prosperity?<sup>13</sup>

The US considers a sustained military, economic, and diplomatic engagement with the Indo-Pacific to be essential for maintaining global influence and leadership. US security and prosperity are closely tied to the IOR remaining free and open; indeed, the US has acknowledged that the evolving balance of power in the area will continue to drive security competition throughout the Indo-Pacific, potentially extending into the Indian Ocean<sup>14</sup>—a trend that is already evident. The Indian Ocean has seen a remarkable growth in great power naval presence in the last two decades,<sup>15</sup> with China, Europe, the UK, Canada, and the US all linking their Indo-Pacific strategies operationally to the region. The US, in particular, has positioned the Indian Ocean as a string pivot of its Indo-Pacific strategy linking the region to its goal of regional stability and other key priorities like climate adaptation, sustainable and inclusive blue economies, and maritime security.<sup>16</sup> For the shifting US imperatives in the Indian Ocean, the region serves as a vital gateway away from former energy dependence concentration in the Gulf towards a diversified engagement based on supply chains, infrastructure, and technology. However, challenges in the Indian Ocean littorals persist, including nuclear proliferation, maritime security, terrorism, and unresolved territorial disputes.

## Great-Power Competition

To deter conflict and maintain its influence, the US has entered into partnerships in the Indian Ocean and invested both private and public capital. Additionally, strengthening partnerships across the Indo-Pacific

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is essential for the US to counterbalance the growing influence of China, which is seeking to undermine US alliances and partnerships by exploiting gaps and opportunities in the region.<sup>17</sup>

Supply chains and critical technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence and biotechnology, are becoming increasingly important to emerging nations in the IOR. Therefore, building strong partnerships and democratic linkages in the Indian Ocean will enable the US to maintain its technological leadership.

The Indian Ocean has become central to the US strategy of extending technical assistance to friendly governments, promoting the rule of law, strengthening civil institutions, and ensuring freedom of navigation. The US strategic framework for countering China's economic aggression<sup>18</sup> highlights the importance of working with like-minded partners to address the challenges posed by China's regional influence.

The strategy relies heavily on its partnership with India in ensuring maritime security. Although the perspectives of the US and India differ—especially regarding aspects of governance and democracy in South Asia, as seen in the case of Bangladesh<sup>e</sup>—the US's perception of India as a net security provider in the broader Indian Ocean outweighs these disagreements. India has emerged as a preferred US partner on security issues, playing a crucial role in upholding maritime security and countering Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia. For the US, India is the only country that is capable of countering Chinese provocations while maintaining a favourable balance in the Indian Ocean. Encouraging India to assume a leadership role in shaping regional security can help address local concerns about great-power overreach and further mitigate the consequences of Chinese influence.

Over the years, a robust foundation for defence cooperation, expanded defence trade, and the transfer of sensitive technologies have elevated the US-India bilateral relationship, enhancing regional security through shared assessments and cooperative strategies. The four foundational agreements between India and the US—General Security of Military

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e The recent political turmoil in Bangladesh leading to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina was a standout example of how the US and India had a dissonance in priorities. For India which shares a border with Bangladesh the priority was political stability in the neighbouring country and the resultant security fall outs, while the US emphasized on how Bangladesh under Hasina was undemocratic.



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Information Agreement (GSOMIA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) 2018, and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) 202—have elevated intelligence sharing, joint training, and domain awareness towards achieving a consequential impact on regional security in the IOR.

## **The First Trump Administration's Focus**

In 2017, the Trump administration unveiled a South Asia strategy focused on addressing continental security threats from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The strategy also included a maritime component.<sup>19</sup> Strengthening the regional architecture in the IOR was identified as one of the administration's top priorities. As part of its initiatives, the Trump administration made its first ever contribution to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with a commitment of US\$113 million for projects in the digital economy, infrastructure, and energy sectors. Additionally, a larger fund of US\$300 million was allocated for security assistance across the broader Indo-Pacific region, with US\$100 million<sup>f</sup> specifically earmarked to support maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, peacekeeping, and efforts to counter transnational crime in South Asia.

In the early years of Trump's first presidency, there were concerns that US commitment to the Indian Ocean, particularly South Asia, was diminishing. During a Congressional hearing on 13 June 2019 before the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Non-Proliferation of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, questions were raised about significant reductions in funding to South Asia.<sup>20</sup> From 2014 to 2017, annual US aid to South Asia averaged US\$2.2 billion, which included US\$1 billion for Afghanistan and nearly US\$800 million for Pakistan. However, the 2018 budget for South Asia was cut by nearly half, and the proposed fiscal year 2020 budget was set at US\$1 billion, with approximately US\$500 million for Afghanistan and US\$70 million for Pakistan, marking a significant reduction.

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<sup>f</sup> Of this, US\$39 million was allocated to Bangladesh, US\$40 million to Sri Lanka, and US\$17 million to Nepal. See: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-policy-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>

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Much of this reduction was due to the funding cuts<sup>21</sup> that the Trump administration imposed against Pakistan<sup>22</sup> while the US sought to refocus its efforts through a Bay of Bengal security initiative. This required approximately US\$30 million for foreign military assistance to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh, with the primary aim of countering Chinese influence in the region.<sup>23</sup>

The first Trump administration's strategy for the Indian Ocean emphasised India's leadership, with Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh identified as nodes in the IOR.<sup>24</sup> Institutional engagement with the region increased, with IORA becoming a platform for diplomatic interactions. The US also emphasised its role as a dialogue partner in IORA through focusing on areas such as the clean maritime economy, women's economic empowerment, and environmental and maritime security issues. To address regional maritime security challenges, including natural disasters, the US collaborated with regional partners under the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).<sup>25</sup> This marked a notable shift from the Indian Navy's initial objections to the US Navy being included in IONS. In the first Trump administration, the US also developed a comprehensive regional outlook,<sup>26</sup> initiating discussions on regional connectivity and infrastructure priorities with regional organisations such as the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

US strategy in the Indian Ocean aims to integrate the region into the broader Indo-Pacific framework by leveraging the logistical and security capabilities of relevant US combatant commands in the Indian Ocean. During the first Trump administration, the 'US Pacific Command' was renamed the 'US Indo-Pacific Command', and a funding corpus of US\$113.5 million to encourage private investment in the region was announced at the July 2018 Indo-Pacific Forum.<sup>27</sup>

## **Continuity Under the Biden Administration**

The Biden administration continued and built on the gains of the preceding presidency. However, the polycrisis, comprising the COVID-19 pandemic and the two wars in Europe and the Middle East, may have slowed the administration's progress by deflecting its strategic focus in the Indo-

# The Indian Ocean in the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Pacific. Yet, the US took a leading role in shaping the regional security architecture of the Indian Ocean by integrating the region through a combined focus on infrastructure and technology initiatives. A well-connected infrastructure network facilitates predictable supply chains, secure shipping, and partnerships, wherein all stakeholders contribute to constructing a shared platform. The US and Japan spearheaded efforts in the region, including through new momentum to initiatives such as the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI), which was announced in 2015,<sup>28</sup> the Blue Dot Network launched in April 2024,<sup>29</sup> and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)<sup>g</sup> launched by the US in May 2022<sup>30</sup> to unite regional partners and offer alternatives to Chinese dominance in infrastructure financing.

One approach has been to create an alternative pool to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by offering infrastructure and development financing without the high interest rates that are often associated with Chinese loans. These efforts aim to democratise development and regional security by fostering a more participatory model that increases the stakes of regional partners, including smaller nations, in securing their own regions. While many of these initiatives are still evolving, it is important to recognise that the US, along with Japan, has augmented regional spending in developing infrastructure and trade connectivity through the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum and the Quality Infrastructure Investment Partnership—a refined version of the PQI, launched in partnership with the World Bank in 2016.<sup>31</sup> By 2023, the QII had approved 229 grants amounting to US\$64.1 million.<sup>32</sup>

Strong regional partnerships, such as the one between India and the US in the Indian Ocean, are underpinned by the principle of independence and autonomy in decision-making by regional countries. India remains an independent actor in the Indian Ocean, regardless of its partnership with the US, and the US has also sought to maintain its independence in the region, which leads to occasional friction. For instance, in April 2021, the *USS John Paul Jones* conducted a freedom of navigation operation near the Lakshadweep Islands, causing unease in New Delhi, as the operation

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<sup>g</sup> PQI is an initiative led by Japan to mobilise private and public resources in collaboration with other countries and international organisations like the Asian Development Bank to address the demand of infrastructure in Asia. The Blue Dot Network was launched in April 2024 at the OECD in Paris as a multilateral initiative aimed at advancing robust standards for global infrastructure and mobilising investment for projects in developing countries. The IPEF was launched in May 2022 by the US with a dozen initial partners across the Indo-Pacific to advance resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and competitiveness for the 14 IPEF economies.

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occurred within India's exclusive economic zone "without requesting India's prior consent".<sup>33</sup>

While the Indian Ocean falls within the Area of Responsibility of the US Seventh Fleet, the Fifth and Seventh Fleets play roles in the region's security architecture from the west and the east, respectively. It would be incorrect to apply the Pacific template of US interests to the Indian Ocean.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the Pacific theatre, where US dominance through the hub-and-spoke alliance system has led to a structured regional security organisation, the Indian Ocean has not exhibited a similar need, despite its transnational character. US interests in the Indian Ocean are centred on addressing transnational security threats, maintaining secure and free sea lines of communication, managing hydrocarbon exports and imports, and engaging in great-power competition with China.<sup>35</sup> As China's influence and ability to project power in the Indian Ocean have grown, there has been an increasing debate within the US about the need for a dedicated expeditionary unit for the Indian Ocean.<sup>36</sup> Much of this discussion has focused on the possibility of reactivating the US Navy's First Fleet, which was disbanded in 1973. Kenneth Braithwaite, Navy Secretary during Trump's first presidency, proposed positioning a rapid response force closer to the Indian Ocean.<sup>37</sup> This issue resurfaced during the Biden administration in a House Armed Services Committee hearing, highlighting the evolving US strategic considerations in the region.<sup>38</sup>

# The Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act of 2024

There is growing recognition in Washington of the need to develop a comprehensive vision for the IOR, as highlighted by the introduction of the Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act of 2024 in the US Congress in May 2024.<sup>h,39</sup> This legislation underscores the importance of addressing the evolving dynamics of US-China competition, aligning with recommendations from the Bipartisan US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, established in 2000 to assess the US-China relationship.<sup>40</sup>

The Act defines the US conception of the IOR as including the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the littoral areas around the Indian Ocean. This legislative initiative reflects the imperative for the US to articulate a clear strategic approach to the Indian Ocean amid intensifying great-power competition.

Access to the Indian Ocean is also central to the renewed outreach by China to South, West, and Central Asia. China's emphasis on securing adequate energy supplies is driven by the country's rising energy demand and dependence on imported fossil fuels. For China, growing energy demands have led to a simultaneous rise in commercial risks and the need for global security, necessitating power projection in the Indian Ocean. Accordingly, the Act outlines the Indian Ocean as a "secondary theatre" to China's interests and highlights that "China's increasing economic ties, growing network of strategic commercial ports, and greater PLA Navy activity could foreshadow a long-term challenge to Indian and U.S. interests in the region."<sup>41</sup> It further highlights that China remains central to the evolving strategy of the US to the Indian Ocean and that Beijing's energy strategy is likely to drive more engagement with the Indian Ocean.

The Act also outlines various policy points with the aim to deepen engagement with countries in the IOR by strengthening diplomatic, security, and economic relations. This includes closer political ties through regional organisations, enhancing bilateral security cooperation with India, and exploring economic and political opportunities together. These policy points also emphasise increasing economic connectivity, protecting trade

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<sup>h</sup> The Act was proposed by Representatives Joaquin Castro (Democrat, Texas) and Darrell Issa (Republican, California).

# The Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act of 2024

routes and shipping lanes to ensure freedom of navigation, and addressing security challenges such as piracy and illegal fishing. Additionally, it involves supporting governments and non-government organisations (NGOs) in disaster response and building resilient infrastructure, enhancing maritime security and awareness, and collaborating with allies such as Japan, Australia, the UK, and France to uphold a rules-based order. The strategy also considers the resources and costs necessary for effective US diplomatic and economic engagement in the region. Perhaps most importantly, the Act seeks to improve intra-institutional coordination between the Department of State, Department of Defense, and United States Agency for International Development for the seamless assessment and implementation of the strategy.

**Table 1: US Objectives in the Indian Ocean**

Objective	Steps
<b>Strengthening Political Engagement</b>	Build stronger political ties with Indian Ocean nations by actively participating in regional organisations and enhancing bilateral diplomatic relations with allies and partners.
<b>Bolstering Security Ties with India</b>	Deepen its security relationship with India, focusing on regularising cooperation in areas such as intelligence sharing, military communication, and naval operations, building on existing foundational agreements.
<b>Leveraging Economic and Political Opportunities</b>	Enhancing economic connectivity and commercial exchange between US and other Indian Ocean countries.
<b>Comprehensive IOR Engagement</b>	Work closely with India to better understand and tap into economic and political opportunities throughout the Indian Ocean region.
<b>Enhancing Economic Links</b>	Boost economic connectivity and commercial exchanges with countries in the Indian Ocean, promoting trade and investment flows.
<b>Safeguarding Maritime Freedom</b>	Ensure the free flow of trade by protecting vital shipping lanes and trade routes in the Indian Ocean, in alignment with international law.

# The Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act of 2024

Objective	Steps
<b>Collaborating on Security Challenges</b>	Partner with Indian Ocean nations to tackle security threats, including piracy and illegal fishing, enhancing regional stability.
<b>Supporting Disaster Resilience</b>	Support regional governments and NGOs in responding to environmental disasters and building resilient infrastructure to mitigate future risks.
<b>Building Maritime Capacity</b>	Enhance maritime security and domain awareness in the Indian Ocean through cooperation with regional allies and partners
<b>Promoting a Rules-Based Order</b>	Work with Indo-Pacific allies such as Japan and Australia, major defence partners such as India, and NATO allies including the UK and France to uphold a rules-based order in the region.

*Source: Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act of 2024*

# The Changing Objectives of US Combatant Commands

The establishment of the Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR) by the US Navy in 1949 marked the beginning of a long-standing American presence in the region. In 1971, MIDEASTFOR set up a base in Bahrain, and in 1983, the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) was established under US Central Command to strengthen its presence and expand its role in the region. In 2002, NAVCENT and the Fifth Fleet were assigned the additional responsibility of overseeing the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which has since become central to the security of the western Indian Ocean.<sup>42</sup>

The CMF is composed of 45 nations that contribute to three task forces focused on counterterrorism, counter-piracy, and maritime security. NAVCENT/Fifth Fleet manages eight task forces that focus on strike operations, contingency response, mine warfare, surface warfare, expeditionary combat, unmanned systems, and logistics. These task forces play a role in supporting naval operations aimed at ensuring maritime stability and security in the Central Region, which serves as a strategic link between the Mediterranean and Pacific through the western Indian Ocean, which includes three critical chokepoints.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the challenges posed by geography, the Indian Ocean has been pivotal to US Combatant Commands and numbered Fleets in executing operations along the peripheries of the IOR. The region has been central to all major US military operations in the Middle East, including Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. The strategic location of the US military facility at Diego Garcia, along with its presence around the Persian Gulf, provides ample staging grounds for military operations in the Indian Ocean. However, two factors influence the shifting priorities of the US military in the region. First, the nature of threats in the Indian Ocean is distinct from those in the Pacific, necessitating different organisational and military capabilities. Second, security vulnerabilities that spill over into the Strait of Hormuz from Middle Eastern instabilities are likely to continue drawing US military resources, although engagement will remain largely confined to partnerships with Western coalition countries and key allies such as Japan and Australia.



# The Changing Objectives of US Combatant Commands

As demonstrated by the recent crisis in the Red Sea involving Houthi rebels,<sup>i</sup> US alliances with Western nations and regional partners in the Middle East remain crucial to maintaining Persian Gulf security. While other Indian Ocean countries have limited capacity to secure the western Indian Ocean, India's role has been critical, particularly in search-and-rescue operations and timely interventions.

With China's increasing assertiveness around the periphery of the Indian Ocean region, including the Strait of Malacca and the Eastern Indian Ocean, US scrutiny of these areas has intensified. While key partners such as India have independently taken measures to enhance regional security—such as implementing the Act East policy—the US's threat perception remains high, particularly regarding the potential threat of a blockade at the Strait of Malacca.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, the US INDOPACOM's crisis anticipation in the Eastern Indian Ocean and Western Pacific has also heightened due to the possibility of a Taiwan Strait crisis. These strategic challenges suggest that both the US and China may increasingly view the Indian Ocean as an arena of great-power competition. However, the Indian Ocean is likely to remain a secondary arena of competition compared to the Pacific, which will continue to be the primary domain for great power rivalry.<sup>45</sup>

The US appears to be preparing for these eventualities in three ways. First, it is investing in enhancing its military and intelligence capabilities in the region.<sup>46</sup> The US has partnered with regional countries such as India for submarine hunting, reconnaissance, surveillance, and intelligence gathering across the Indian Ocean. It has also provided India with military equipment and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, alongside positioning liaison officers for real-time domain awareness at the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).<sup>47</sup>

Second, the US has reassessed its strategic presence at Diego Garcia from a forward-looking perspective and complemented it with the recent Mauritius-UK agreement in October 2024,<sup>48</sup> which will allow US presence

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i The recent Red Sea crisis involves Houthi rebels escalating attacks on commercial shipping, targeting vessels in international waters near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. These actions, attributed to proxy groups supported by Iran, aim to disrupt global trade routes and pressure Saudi Arabia amid Yemen's ongoing conflict, raising regional security concerns.

# The Changing Objectives of US Combatant Commands

to continue for another 99 years, along with efforts by the UK to support the resettlement of Chagossians in all other islands except Diego Garcia. The joint statement underscores the cooperation of India and the US in finding an amicable resolution with Mauritius. In August 2024, India, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka signed the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) Charter,<sup>49</sup> which hints that India may have worked behind the scenes in aligning its IOR interests with both regional and extra-regional powers.

Third, the US is bolstering its military capabilities along the eastern flank of the Indian Ocean, with a particular focus on strategic locations such as Coco Island (Keeling) and HMAS Stirling—the Australian naval base in Western Australia. The proximity of these sites to the Strait of Malacca is critical for combined US-Australia power projection. Additionally, the US is implementing measures around the western and northern Australian coastlines to enhance its crisis response capabilities in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. These steps underscore a shifting role for the US Navy in the Indian Ocean as part of a broader strategy to counterbalance China's growing influence and maintain stability in this increasingly contested region.<sup>50</sup>

The US military commands and fleets associated with the security of the IOR will be critical in a potential future crisis. The change from USPACOM to INDOPACOM was not merely titular but carried an intent of operational shift in focus towards the Indian Ocean. The US combatant commands and fleets have adapted their objectives in the Indian Ocean to regional demands rather than looking for a new node of military presence in the region, which will likely complicate the stability of the Asian maritime expanse. There is a fair degree of consensus that the US does not need another base in the Indian Ocean.<sup>51</sup> This proposition has been critically examined in light of the controversy around the crisis in Bangladesh<sup>j,52</sup> and some erroneous reports<sup>53</sup> that the US might be looking to set up another base in the Bay of Bengal. There is continued regional resistance, both ideological and political, to enhanced military presence by any great power, primarily the US.

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j The controversy stems from rumours that the US expressed strategic interest in St. Martin's Island, fuelling speculation that Washington might have supported political shifts in Bangladesh to counter Sheikh Hasina's perceived alignment with China. This has amplified anti-US sentiment in South Asia, where such actions are viewed as interference in sovereign affairs.

# From Dominance to Shared Leadership

US presence in the IOR has undergone a shift from a predominantly military-focused approach to one centred on partnerships and technology-driven strategies, fostering a more interconnected and cooperative regional landscape. This evolving strategy supports regional partners, notably India, in taking a leadership role to establish a rules-based order while the US champions a regional framework grounded in international law, democratic principles, and cooperative engagement. The US emphasises adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as a means to deter stakeholders such as China from altering the regional balance, whether through direct military expansion or grey-zone activities.<sup>54</sup>

Key partnerships and multilateral frameworks have thus become pivotal to US strategy in the Indian Ocean. France's strategic presence at Réunion Island in the western Indian Ocean, India's extensive coastline and status as the largest regional navy, and key alliances with nations such as Japan and Australia have shifted the approach of the US from unilateral dominance to shared leadership. Minilateral frameworks are central to this strategy, particularly in advancing the US-led Indo-Pacific vision.

Collaborative arrangements such as the Japan-America-India (JAI) partnership, the France-India-UAE partnership, the US-Australia-Japan grouping, Malabar naval exercises, and most prominently the Quad, provide the foundation for constructing a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific centred around the Indian Ocean. Several minilateral groups are now focusing on economic connectivity, supply-chain resilience, and security cooperation, all of which have direct implications for the Indian Ocean.

India's bilateral defence relationship with the US includes a strong maritime component, featuring modern defence equipment and enhanced collaboration in ISR. A technology-driven security paradigm is increasingly shaping the Indian Ocean landscape. India and the US have led discussions to adopt a more collaborative approach, emphasising the sharing of advanced technologies, including semiconductors, building resilient infrastructure, and ensuring secure and sustainable supply

# From Dominance to Shared Leadership

chains.<sup>k,55</sup> Initiatives such as iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology) between India and the US, the PGII, and the PQI are designed to construct a comprehensive regional architecture that aligns with the evolving global order. These initiatives also underscore the importance of shared responsibility in the face of the rising influence of regional players, particularly India. There is a recognition within the US that sustainable global influence necessitates empowering regional partners and allies to assume leadership roles, thereby fostering a more balanced and resilient regional security architecture.<sup>56</sup>

A consequence of these evolving imperatives is that regional countries no longer perceive a direct threat from the US; instead, China's actions have emerged as a primary concern. While this shift sets the stage for great-power competition in the Indian Ocean, historical context and regional dynamics suggest that such competition will likely remain less intense than in the Pacific. As the regional order evolves, US strategy in the Indian Ocean is expected to hinge on two main objectives: consolidating its military presence while diversifying stakes across the region and allowing regional stakeholders to take the lead in shaping security architecture, with the US adopting a supportive role. However, when US security interests are at stake, especially in urgent situations, it may act unilaterally. Competition with China and leveraging critical partnerships, especially with India, will likely dominate US policy decisions. The Republican presidency under Trump is likely to push for India to increase its regional capabilities and share more of the security burden.

With the Indian Ocean becoming more integral to the global economy due to shifting supply chains to Southeast Asia and India, regional security will increasingly depend on the sustainability and security of these supply chains, which are crucial for broader connectivity. Upcoming projects

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<sup>k</sup> The focus on technology, semiconductors, and infrastructure form a part of almost all cooperative discussions and framework including the Quad, the 2+2 dialogue and other bilateral channels. Increasingly, these sectors impact most other areas of bilateral cooperation between India and the US. India and the US have prioritised collaboration in critical and emerging technologies through initiatives like the iCET, focusing on joint semiconductor research and development. Notable examples include Micron Technology's US\$825-million semiconductor assembly plant in Gujarat and the US-India Critical Minerals Partnership, which aims to secure sustainable supply chains for critical materials.

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such as the India-Israel-UAE-US (I2U2) and India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) could revolutionise trans-regional connectivity in the Indian Ocean, provided that peace and stability return to the Middle East, which could potentially draw the US into more economically focused partnerships in the region.

Despite these efforts, some in the US believe<sup>57</sup> that the Indian Ocean remains underrepresented in US strategic thinking, particularly because of a lack of doctrinal focus. This viewpoint suggests that, despite the broader Indo-Pacific strategy, the Indian Ocean is often viewed as a boundary rather than a critical strategic space. A nuanced analysis of US strategy reveals a deliberate avoidance of deep strategic commitments to prevent regional opposition from flaring up.

While India and the US share a strategic vision for the Indian Ocean, fundamental differences remain in their commitments to freedom, human rights, and international law. For instance, India and the US may find themselves at odds on the issue of the Chagos Archipelago; reflecting a broader Global South stance against lingering colonial influences, India supports the independence of the Chagossian people and has voted in favour of the UN resolution calling for the UK to end its administration of the islands. The US remains silent on the issue, shielded as an uninvolved third party in the lease between Britain and Mauritius.

Ultimately, US strategy in the Indian Ocean will continue to evolve alongside the changing economies, interests, and roles of regional countries. Among external influences, China remains the most significant concern for US interests in the region. Rather than focusing on specific force deployments, the US should continue to embrace the current model of regional leadership by local stakeholders and engage in joint exercises with both regional and extra-regional partners.

# Policy Recommendations

- Recognising the economic importance of the Indian Ocean, the US should focus on economic integration and building resilient supply chains through initiatives such as PQI, PGII, and perhaps through the I2U2 and IMEEC, if the second Trump administration achieves the intended peace in the Middle East.
- India and the US could work together to leverage their ASEAN centrality to cooperate in harnessing the blue economy potential of each on the eastern side of the Strait of Malacca.
- The US should reinforce its commitment to a rules-based order in the Indian Ocean by advocating for the UNCLOS and opposing actions that threaten regional stability, such as China's militarisation of strategic waterways. Perhaps its own ratification of the Convention will pave the way and instil trust in maritime Asia. [ORF](#)

## Appendix: Critical U.S. Facilities In and Around IOR

Facility	Function
Diego Garcia	A major U.S. naval support facility in the British Indian Ocean Territory
Camp Lemonnier (Djibouti)	The primary base for US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in the Horn of Africa, supporting regional security and counterterrorism operations.
Al Udeid Air Base (Qatar)	A key US airbase hosting CENTCOM's Forward Headquarters, pivotal for operations in the Middle East and South Asia.
Naval Support Activity (Bahrain)	Headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, responsible for operations in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and parts of the Indian Ocean.
Thumrait Air Base (Oman)	Used for logistical support and regional operations, particularly during conflicts in the Middle East. The US, RAF and Indian Air Force use it.
Masirah Island Air Base (Oman)	A critical location used for U.S. military operations in the region, supporting various missions.
Al Dhafra Air Base (UAE)	A strategic airbase used for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions in the region.
Camp As Sayliyah (Qatar)	A logistics hub and prepositioning facility for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), supporting regional military operations.
Naval Support Facility (Singapore)	Supports U.S. naval operations in the Indo-Pacific, including the eastern Indian Ocean, enhancing regional presence and readiness.
Garrison Facilities (Seychelles)	Used primarily for drone operations and monitoring maritime activities in the Indian Ocean, supporting regional security initiatives.

Source: Author's own

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