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Strategic Contestation in the Indian Ocean: US–China–India Rivalry and Its Implications for South Asian Security

Muhammad Nayyer Adnan
M.Phil Scholar in International Relations at Riphah International University, Islamabad.
Nayyeradnan9955@gmail.com
Muhammad Irfan Abbasi
M.Phil Scholar in International Relations at Riphah International University, Islamabad.
fani1892003@gmail.com
Dr. Asia Karim
Assistant Professor IR, M. Phil Scholar in International Relations at Riphah International University, Islamabad.

ABSTRACT
The Indian Ocean is the new centre of geopolitical competition and diplomatic tussle, where the United States, China and India are increasingly engaged in the battle for control at sea. Today, the region is a key economic gateway, accounting for almost 80 percent of the world's seaborne oil and about half of the world's container shipping, and it has become a strategic flashpoint. This paper will focus on the changing security architecture of South Asia as a result of the triangular relationship among Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi becoming dynamic. Within a structural realist framework, the study examines the strategic interests and tools of each great power, the process of militarisation as part of strategy, the dynamics of alliance formation, port diplomacy, technological competition, and the knock-on effects for regional security. The findings point to increasing security dilemmas in South Asia, high migratory pressures on smaller littoral states like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, and strategic friction between Pakistan's and India's navies due to the increased intensity of naval deployments, infrastructure development, competition, and an exclusionary alliance structure. The paper proposes that the risks of escalation and the maintenance of regional security can be addressed through cooperative maritime governance, confidence-building measures, and multilateral security frameworks.

Keywords: *Indian Ocean, Great Power Competition, South Asia, Maritime Security.*

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean, the third-largest body of water in the world, has transformed from a relatively distant Cold War arena into a geopolitical hub of the 21st-century global system. Today, the ocean is the main artery of global trade, energy, and digital connectivity for almost 40% of the world's population, and it borders 40 littoral states. Around 80 percent of the world's seaborne oil and nearly half of all global container traffic come through these waters, and the three chokepoints in the region the Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz, play key roles in the transit of global energy security (US Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2025; India Foundation, 2026). The Strait of Malacca is responsible for about 29 percent of seaborne oil traffic, and about USD 3.5 trillion worth of trade passes through the strait each year (Inside Supply Management, 2023). Therefore, such convergence of flows has given an unprecedented strategic significance to the Indian Ocean world.

This increasing prominence places the area as the core of a dynamic theatre of great-power rivalry. Established maritime hegemon, the United States, wants to maintain "rules-based order" based on freedom of navigation and put in place an "Indo-Pacific architecture" that aligns with its partners and allies. Through the only genuine appropriate deployment in the maritime field the Maritime Silk Road, BRI, and a multistate global system of so-called "dual use" ports China has insatiably sought to project its "strength" in the sea areas that are of interest or importance to it, driven by China's "strategic and economic interests" and energy needs, as well as an expression of China's goal to have a "world-class" Navy by 2049. India, the regional power, first presented a vision statement for the ocean in the latest Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine of 2015 and more recently through the 2025 MAHASAGAR initiative, to position itself as the "net security provider" and "preferred security partner" of the entire region (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2015; Indo-Pacific Studies Center, 2026).

This combination of three strategic projects has created a more and more contentious seascape. Chinese navy's presence has grown through various facilities, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Support Base in Djibouti, opened in 2017, and the Hambantota concession in Sri Lanka, and has fuelled Indian fears of being "encircled," and China sees U.S.-led mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as tools of strategic containment. The result is a triangular security dilemma whose impact reverberates throughout the broader South Asian sub-region, involving smaller states that end up embroiled in the strategic machinations of major powers in the region.

The research problem that motivated this research was thus how a converging triangular competition among the United States, China, and India is reshaping South Asia's security landscape. The paper outlines two related questions: How the competition between Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi has been developing in military, infrastructural, and technological aspects both in the Indian Ocean and the South Asian countries and what implications this trend has for the strategic balance between India and Pakistan and the foreign-policy autonomy of Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh. As it attempts to answer these questions, the study fulfils three goals: mapping major power strategic interests and instruments; assessing the nature of the rivalry dynamics; analysing the consequences for regional stability and promoting a series of policy recommendations.

It is rooted in the structural realists' strand of the qualitative and interpretive genre. It relies on primary and secondary sources like official strategy documents, governmental and inter-governmental reports, peer-reviewed scholarship, and well-placed and reputable policy analyses to build up a contextualised account of the contemporary Indian Ocean order. The rest of the paper goes as follows. Existing literature is discussed, and a research gap identified in the next section. The third section presents the theoretical rationale, and the remaining sections explore the strategic interests and the nature of rivalry among the principal powers, as well as their impacts on South Asian security and regional stability. A penultimate section provides policy recommendations, and the final section summarises the findings and considers avenues for future cooperation.

2. Literature Review

Over the last twenty years, there has been significant scholarship on the online strategic transformation of the Indian Ocean. Influentially, Kaplan (2010) re-wrote history, presenting the Indian Ocean as 'the centre stage' of the geopolitics of the 21st century, foreshadowing a rising claim of naval powers in the Indian Ocean, which until now have been regarded as waters in the periphery. Now, the maritime significance of the area is indisputable: Some 50 percent of

container shipping runs across its sea lanes, as does about 80 percent of the world's seaborne crude oil including that of Asia's industrial giants (EIA, 2025; India Foundation, 2026).

The second group of scholarship works on the dynamics of great power competition. According to Holmes and Yoshihara (2012), this pattern of contemporary Chinese strategy indicates a shift towards mahi blue water capability and forward presence. It was Pehrson (2006) who formulated the referred to "String of Pearls" thesis that identified the connectivity and network of port investments from the South China Sea to the Gulf of Persian and it was later nuanced by Brewster (2017) and Khurana (2008), who highlighted its dual-use nature and analytical limitations. The third strand focuses on China's growing presence at sea, including through the BRI and the Maritime Silk Road, and includes the operation of facilities at Djibouti, Gwadar and Hambantota (Hillman, 2018; Chellaney, 2017). Mohamadi and Brewster (2012; 2014) have offered a longer regional continuity of ambition as an explanation of India's response, by seeing it as the "net security provider." The idea was brought into sharp focus by the SAGAR doctrine, stated by Prime Minister Modi in 2015 and expanded to MAHASAGAR in 2025(MEA, 2015; Durai, 2025).

The fourth sub-genre explores America's Indo-Pacific agenda with emphasis on freedom of navigation, alliance management and building a favourable balance of power (White House, 2022; Scott, 2008). However, paradoxically, research that connects the three rivalries under a single analytical prism and that delves into the ripple effects for South Asian security is relatively limited. This research fills that gap by examining the United States–China–India contestation in an approach that is triadic and, in some aspects, regional in nature.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this study is structural realism by Mearsheimer (2014) and Waltz (1979). Structural realism sees the international system as anarchic and self-help: without an overall authority, states have to focus on "survival", on maximising power and on the relative gains. This theory focuses on the distribution of capabilities and the structural pressure that distribution of capabilities exerts, rather than domestic political or ideological processes.

Two analytical axes of structural realism are relevant in the context of Indian Ocean. The first is what is called "the security dilemma". Offensive actions of a state, like naval modernization, basing and alliance formation, may be felt as being defensive by others, who may retaliate by adopting countermeasures that make the first state less defensive. This interaction can be seen in India, as the Chinese ports "whirl around the Indian Ocean, the Indian navy grows," and the U.S. presents at these alliances as a consolidating force. Every state act for what it considers its proper interests which raises insecurity in its rival(s).

The second axis relates to the issue of power transition and balancing. Mearsheimer's offensive realism posits that as a power grows, it tries to maximize its relative power, particularly a regional hegemon-in-the-making, and that an established power tries to balance. India has internally countered China with a navy modernisation program and externally with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue being a critical part of India's external balancing, and a series of bilateral maritime alliances with the U.S., Japan, France, and Australia that all anticipate 370+ Chinese ships by 2024 and around 450 Chinese ships by 2030(US Department of Defense [DoD], 2024; Singh, 2023).

Secondary states are also (partially) better understood in the light of structural realism. Smaller states in South Asia that lack the capability to balance on their own will be predicted to resort to "hedging" between great powers, which will involve mixed balancing, band wagoning, and engagement that will not foreclose options. This is clearly in line with the empirical shifts of defence arrangements, diplomatic alliances and port concessions all over the region. Structural realism is not the only approach to the Indian Ocean's metamorphosis: constructivist theory on

identity and liberal theory on interdependence provide supplementary explanations. It offers a very solid framework for the triangular rivalry and its regional implications based on its parsimonious approach of capabilities, structural pressures, and rational state behaviour.

4. Strategic Interests of Major Powers in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is important for strategic reasons because of an intersection of energy, trade and geography that provides any country seeking to be influential in Asia. The three powers, which have been active in the region, China, USA and India have expressed their respective interest in the region differently. While there are some differences in what they are trying to achieve, their footprints are overlapping, intersecting and more and more conflictual.

The United States views Indo-Pacific as a continuum between the western Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Washington's primary concerns involve freedom of navigation, a rules-based maritime order, energy and trade lanes security for Washington. “Free and open” represents a key tenet of the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, as do alliance modernisation and integrated deterrence (White House, 2022). Access arrangements in Singapore, Bahrain, and, increasingly, with India, under LEMOA, 2016 and COMCASA, 2018 agreements, plus the strategic backbone of the American posture, the Naval Support Facility at Diego Garcia in the British Indian Ocean Territory, which can house bombers, submarines, and carrier strike groups. Through frequent freedom-of-navigation operations and multilateral exercises the U.S. is trying to create a deterrent without a Cold War footprint in the region.

China's strategic engagement in the IOR is economic and security in nature. The Malacca dilemma, which means China's dependence on a chokepoint where around 80% of its oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca, has been a major concern for Chinese strategists. Half of China's oil imports are from the Middle East and the other half from the East (Inside Supply Management, 2023). To minimize this risk China has been very active in pursuing the Maritime Silk Road part of the BRI, where it has been building ports, industrial complexes and connectivity infrastructure around the rim. It includes Gwadar (Pakistan) Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and multiple terminals in Africa. CPEC will have a sea destination at Gwadar, which will lessen reliance on Strait of Malacca. At the same time, the PLAN has evolved from an inshore navy to one that regularly crosses the first island chain. Self-determination became the policy of China's power projection around 2017 when the PLA Support Base in Djibouti was established. It was China's first foreign military base, which hosts some 2,000 personnel and a pier for an aircraft carrier (Africa Center, 2026). The Gulf of Aden has been the hub for PLAN anti-piracy escort task groups on a continuous patrol since 2008, thus establishing a Chinese presence within the umbrella of public goods provision.

India's interests are geographical, civilisational and existential. India considers the Indian Ocean its biggest and foremost maritime area, as the country is the biggest Peninsular state in the region with a coastline stretching over 7,500 kilometres and the EEZ obligations involving strategic islands like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This notion of ‘net security provider’ as advocated by the then Defence Minister A.K Antony during its formal announcement in 2011 and catapulted by the SAGAR doctrine of 2015, reflects India's desire to become the major supplier of maritime security goods, humanitarian assistance, anti-piracy operations, hydrographic services, and information sharing to the smaller states of the rim (MEA, 2015; Brewster, 2014). This aspiration was elaborated and formalised in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (Indian Navy, 2015), which divided the primary, secondary and tertiary areas of interest from the East Coast of Africa to the Strait of Malacca and beyond. Concrete efforts involve the 2018-based Information Fusion Center Indian Ocean Region (IFC – IOR), which has 28 partners until 2025(South Asian Voices, 2025), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and 22 white

shipping ties. Modernisation of the navy has quickened, with two aircraft carriers in operation (INS Vikramaditya and the all-India built INS Vikrant) and a fast-expanding submarine fleet, which includes ballistic-missile submarines, and a vast development of maritime aviation. During the unveiling of the MAHASAGAR vision in March 2025, the SAGAR framework, previously a security-based concept, was expanded geographically to the broader Global South with an economic diplomacy, technological cooperation, and sustainability-oriented approach (Indo-Pacific Studies Center, 2026).

While there are these doctrinal lines of continuity, China's threat has been an increasing component of India's strategy. The escalation of Sino-Pakistani navy cooperation, readying up submarine bases in Bangladesh, and Chinese deployments with research vessels in the Indian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) are moving New Delhi towards the United States, Japan, France, and Australia, as seen in increased talks for the Quad and broadening of the Malabar exercises. The powers' strategic interests and instruments can be summarised as in Table 1.

Table 1. *Strategic Interests and Instruments of the Major Powers in the Indian Ocean*

Power	Primary Strategic Interests	Key Instruments	Major Bases / Access
United States	Freedom of navigation; rules-based order; alliance preservation; counter-hegemony	5th and 7th Fleets; Indo-Pacific Strategy; Quad; FONOPs; LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA	Diego Garcia; Bahrain; Singapore; reciprocal access in India
China	Energy security; SLOC protection; counter-encirclement; great-power status	PLAN; BRI / Maritime Silk Road; CPEC; anti-piracy task groups; port investments	Djibouti; Gwadar; Hambantota; access at Ream (Cambodia); pending sites
India	Regional primacy; net security provision; SLOC security; counter-China balancing	Indian Navy modernisation; SAGAR / MAHASAGAR; IFC-IOR; IONS; Quad; Malabar	Karwar; Andaman & Nicobar Command; Agalega (Mauritius); Duqm access (Oman); Sabang (Indonesia)

Compiled By the Authors

Though these overlapping footprints can be interpreted through the prism of defensive logics, the norms and structures that they create give rise to an atmosphere of suspicion that should be read as the modern Indian Ocean.

5. Strategic Rivalry in the Indian Ocean

The competition of a decade among China, US and India is emerging in four intertwined. These are turning the oceans into theatre of war, port diplomacy, building strategic alliances, and rival infrastructure initiatives. All these dimensions mutually support each other and create an interdependent system of contestation which sets off the contemporary IOR as different from the earlier periods.

The most obvious part of the tussle is that the region has been militarized in its marine sphere. More deployment has occurred on the coast-line. The ongoing presence of the US Navy at Bahrain, regular visits from the Seventh Fleet, and the US naval base at Diego Garcia in the centre of the Indian Ocean. The PLAN has expanded in size from some 255 ship at the start of 2015 to more than 370 at the beginning of 2024 and is expected to reach 450 by 2030(DoD, 2024; Singh, 2023). Its operations have been ever more distant, with first-ever operations by two carrier strike

groups outside the first island chain in 2025. With China, the training in the far seas in the eastern Indian Ocean has become routine. The Indian Navy, on the other hand, is working towards developing blue water capabilities, commissioned home-made carrier, INS Vikrant, in 2022. It expedited delivery of submarines and established the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command as a forward bastion to look after the western mouth of the Strait of Malacca.

The second dimension is in terms of strategic alliances and partnerships. This is where the balancing lesson has been learnt most, through quadrilaterals which have been upheld to a leaders' summit in 2021 under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). The Quad makes no reference to a military dimension but instead focuses on critical and emerging technologies, maritime domain awareness and supply-chain resilience. All of these are functional to the regional security. Moreover, satellite tracking is also incorporated into the regional information fusion centres that provide a common operational picture to more than 24 member countries in Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) that was formed during the Tokyo Quad Leaders' Summit in 2022 and extended to the Indian Ocean under the IFC – IOR, at Gurugram (White House, 2024). Other bilateral partnerships are promoted as well: the basic defence cooperation agreements with the USA (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA), 2+2 dialogue between Australia, the UK and the USA, and French Indo-Pacific strategy, which includes La Réunion. China, in its part, has upgraded ties with Pakistan to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Congressional Research Service, 2025). It has upgraded cooperation relationships with both Djibouti to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and is working to enhance ties with Iran and Myanmar.

Thirdly, there's port diplomacy and infrastructure road battles. The multivariousness and strategic positioning of the rim are being enhanced by the rivalry of the "dual-use" ports. China's largest investments are at Gwadar, where Beijing is pouring its money into expansion projects, the Hambantota, which was leased to the Chinese company China Merchants Port Holdings for USD 1.12 billion in 2017(CSIS, 2026), Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Ream Naval Base in Cambodia. The Iran-Pakistan 2024 ten-year deal for the development of Chabahar port is welcomed by the United States and India as an alternative port to Gwadar to serve Indian connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Japan and India have commenced construction via the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor and the Asia–Africa–Europe Global Gateway, while the U.S.-based Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment has attempted to offer financing options for BRI. There has been much debate about whether or not these investments are “economics of debt-trap diplomacy,” the role that economic and political considerations in recipient countries have played in such investments, and what that might mean but no one doubts the physical infrastructure competition (Moramudali & Panduwawala, 2024).

Table 2. *Major Port Infrastructure Investments and Strategic Significance in the Indian Ocean*

Port	Lead Backer	Year of Activation	Strategic Significance
Diego Garcia	United States/UK	1971	Forward-deployed bombers, submarines, carrier support
Djibouti (PLA Support Base)	China	2017	First overseas Chinese base; pier accommodates carriers

Port	Lead Backer	Year of Activation	Strategic Significance
Gwadar	China (CPEC)	Operational 2007; expanded post-2015	Bypass of Malacca; access to Arabian Sea
Hambantota	China (99-year lease)	2017	Strategic node near east–west sea lanes
Chabahar	India / Iran	2017; expanded 2024	Indian counter to Gwadar; Afghan/Central Asia connectivity
Duqm	Oman / India access	2018	Indian logistics access in Western IOR
Agalega (Mauritius)	India	2024 (upgraded airstrip and jetty)	Indian surveillance and replenishment node
Sabang	Indonesia / India access	2018	Eastern IOR access near the Strait of Malacca

Compiled by the Author

Technological and intelligence competition is the fourth dimension, and the one that is getting more and more significant. Maritime Domain Awareness is now of strategic importance. The U.S. has a very extensive space-based and undersea surveillance system, with modernized integrated undersea systems as well. China is funding an undersea sensor network, the oceanographic research vessel and the BeiDou satellite navigation system, and is reportedly able to move into seabed surveillance. India has extended the IFC–IOR coverage and it is reported that it is contemplating expanding the so-called "Fish Hook" surveillance line from Sumatra to the Great Nicobar Islands (Singh, 2023). Undersea security has also become an issue with the vast majority of data traffic running through submarine cable networks, many of which are laid through the Indian Ocean (India Foundation, 2026), making sea communications a major vulnerability and an area of new competition. These four dimensions mesh synergically to create a regional environment more militarised, more institutionally ‘segmented' and more technologically ‘contested' than any since decolonisation.

6. Implications for South Asian Security and Regional Stability

The triangular competition between the USA, China, and India is far from being played in a strategy vacuum: its effects are most localised at the edges, in the geographical area of the South Asian subcontinent, where competition overlaps with existing fault lines of the regional states. Before these wider issues of stability are discussed, the implications of the rivalry can be analysed at three levels: the general regional security environment, the bilateral strategic balance between India and Pakistan, and the strategic plight of the smaller South Asian states.

In each region, a militarisation that is an inescapable structural feature has emerged. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, South Asia is one of the fastest-growing regions in defence spending, and is home to two declared nuclear-weapon states, India and Pakistan, as well as being caught up in the maritime rivalry that seems to be spreading out from the broader Indian Ocean region. Several factors, such as naval developments by India, escalating U.S. involvement, and techno passes to Pakistan, and China's support to Pakistan, further squeeze the military room for manoeuvre of all the states. Having more ‘dual use’ ports would

logically place other naval units closer, increasing vulnerabilities to accidents, misperceptions and accidental escalation.

All these dynamics significantly affect Pakistan's strategic position. Gwadar, on the Balochistan Coast on the Arabian Sea, has been given immense strategic significance as the sea route for CPEC and as a potential alternative to Chinese energy imports around the Strait of Malacca (Lowy Institute, 2018). Pakistan's ongoing cooperation with China under the terms of the China-Pakistan All Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership involves joint naval manoeuvres (infiltrating the waters as Sea Guardians), agreeing to buy Chinese-built Type 054A/P frigates and Hanguor-class submarines, and continuous modernization of the Joint Air Defense System. Thus, the partnership improves Pakistan's traditional and strategic equilibrium with India but also deepens Pakistan's involvement in the Sino-Indian conflict while simultaneously aligning its CPEC investment portfolio with great power competition and making it vulnerable to spillovers in Gwadar. But Pakistan's ability to meet the strategic promise of the corridor has been put to the test by internal developments such as separatist activities in Balochistan and the security situation that has challenged Chinese workers.

The maritime aspect of competition has had a significant impact on the India–Pakistan strategic balance. Pakistan's qualitative options are now limited as the Indians continue their rapid naval modernization, which includes the induction of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (Arihant class), an increase in the number of surface combatants, carrier-borne aviation, and the BrahMos cruise missile. Pakistan, however, has reacted with its asymmetric arsenal driven by the ability to deliver nuclear weapons from the sea using its Babur-3 cruise missile, which they have shown off in 2017 and 2018, as well as closer interaction with China's navy. The outcome is a maritime nuclear element of South Asian deterrence dynamics that overlays traditional land-based dynamics. What used to happen on the Line of Control (LoC) or in the airspace over Kashmir now has an oceanic equivalent, with all the dangers of escalation in that arena, where the complex CBMs have built up step by step on land.

Even for the lesser power South Asian nations, the impact is no less, although not in the same form. Sri Lanka's case with the Chinese-built Hambantota port, which served as a template for other island nations to lease to China Merchants Port Holdings for USD 1.12 billion with a 99-year lease and which faced considerable opposition over debt-trap diplomacy, is a symbol of the strategic conundrum faced by island nations (Britannica, 2025; CSIS, 2026). Given the Maldives' strategic location in key sea lanes, the government, under different alignments, has shifted back and forth, and the government that came to power in 2024 has taken a much more forceful stance on independence from India, while furthering ties with China. Traditionally, India's close ally, Bangladesh, has been buying Chinese submarines and building the BNS Sheik Hasina submarine base; the strategic surge has repercussions beyond bilateral relations. What can be seen in these cases is that the analytically predicted arrangement of “hedging” is the dominant one, namely, small states mate in various ways but have narrow margins for negotiation, and when they get it wrong, the costs may be high.

Such bilateral and sub-regional dynamics overlap with several more general issues of regional stability. Firstly, a form of historic mistrust has hardened among the great powers, becoming an institutional reality in the region. It is a standard habit of Indian strategists to analyse Beijing's port investments as part of the so-called ‘String of Pearls’ this time, with China regarding the Quad and the growing U.S.-India strategic partnership in an attempt to contain Beijing. Second, the risks of maritime wars have increased. In the sea, the fragmentation of ocean space, number of warships, density of submarine activities and frequency of routine PLAN deployments to the eastern Indian Ocean is increased. This increases the likelihood of incidents occurring in the sea,

especially in small sea lanes and disputed EEZs. The existing risk-reduction system is unevenly applied (e.g., the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea). Third, an arms race dynamic is becoming increasingly apparent. India has given the green light to a third aircraft carrier and expansion of its submarine fleet; Pakistan is planning to obtain up to eight Hangor-class submarines, and China is aiming to field nine carriers with strike groups by 2035(DoD, 2024). Fourth, the occasional political shocks in littoral countries, whether through a coup in Maiangin, a constitutional crisis, an insurgency, or the early stages of an economic meltdown, as in Sri Lanka in 2022, provide opportunities for foreign actors and make it difficult to put together a regional response.

Table 3. *Differential Impact of Great-Power Rivalry on South Asian States*

State	Principal Vector of Impact	Resulting Strategic Posture
Pakistan	CPEC and Sino-Pakistani naval cooperation; Gwadar	Tighter alignment with China; modernisation of the navy
India	Quad; SAGAR/MAHASAGAR; counter-China balancing	Strategic autonomy plus selective alignment with the US/Japan/Australia
Sri Lanka	Hambantota concession; competing financing	Hedging; renewed engagement with India and the IMF
Maldives	Port investments; political alternation	Pronounced hedging; oscillation between New Delhi and Beijing
Bangladesh	Submarine acquisitions; defence cooperation	Maintained closeness to India; expanding Chinese partnership
Nepal / Bhutan	Connectivity and infrastructure financing	Limited maritime exposure; continental hedging

Compiled by Authors

These processes suggest a zone of security relations becoming increasingly defined by strategic competition from outside its borders; that is, by processes that limit indigenous approaches to collective management. The SAARC has been on the verge of collapse for almost a decade, and there is no maritime equivalent of the Asia-Pacific-level institutional architecture. The message is that the region could enter a more uneasy era if people here did not make a conscious effort to build cooperative structures.

7. Policy Recommendations

While these structural pressures due to triangular great power competition may not be mitigated, they can be downplayed or eased by careful policy. The foregoing analysis resolves to 5 interrelated recommendations. They are written to the states of the region that are most intensely affected by the conflict and to the great powers, the nations that decide the strength of the conflict.

Cooperation among different regions in maritime security first needs to be reinforced by revitalizing existing institutions or establishing new ones to increase cooperation among them. Useful forums are the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). However, they have yet to make full use of their potential. If they can be expanded to incorporate working groups on maritime security, fisheries management, search and rescue, and disaster response, as these same issues will be raised in the future, then cooperative practice will

be bolstered, and a culture of dialogue between antagonistic camps will be established. The Colombo Security Conclave, a group of India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, and Seychelles, represents a window of sub-regional cooperation of immense potential, especially within the expanded scope of its membership, and should thus be pursued both functionally and geographically.

Second, PaCT should be encouraged to facilitate the formation of multilaterals to address fragmentation caused by exclusive Mini laterals. The Quad has an obvious balancing role, but it can't take the place of inclusive frameworks. Even informal Indo-Pacific dialogues involving China and ASEAN will minimize the risk of hardening the dialogue into opposing Indo-Pacific blocs. Dialogues between scholars, retired military members, and civil society can function in parallel as one means of maintaining lines of communication during formal diplomatic tensions.

Thirdly, confidence-building measures (CBMs) are direly needed. The risk of accidental escalation would be lowered if all the major naval powers in the Indian Ocean adopted the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), which all four established in the 1972 United States–Soviet INCSEA agreement. Joint humanitarian assistance and DR activities offer politically convenient spaces to work between the competition. It is particularly urgent in the maritime aspect of South Asian nuclear deterrence in the absence of any established and agreed-upon crisis management mechanisms.

Fourth, the concept of freedom of navigation as formulated in the UNCLOS ought to be reemphasized by all sides. It might never be interpreted the same way in the United States and China in their exclusive economic zones, but if confirmation is consistently carried out, it would ensure the safety of goods that the Indian Ocean carries.

Fifth, by promoting economic cooperation, it's an alternative to confrontation. The BRI and other infrastructure initiatives, such as the European Union's Global Gateway, the U.S. Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, and Indian and Japanese vehicles, should be evaluated based on a common set of criteria: transparency, sustainability and quality. Maritime connectivity can be transformed from a competition to a cooperation by collaborative blue-economy projects, climate adaptation projects targeted for climate-vulnerable coastal countries and a consolidated and shared ocean port-governance regime. These can be carried out together and would not remove the more fundamental competitive pressures but could give a margin of safety in the competition and help to maintain the Indian Ocean as an ocean of shared (not zero-sum) prosperity.

8. Conclusion

The Indian Ocean today is where this new power shift being negotiated in the twenty-first century, is taking place. The tri-polar dynamics between the China, US and India are related to the structural change in the international system, the relative reduction of unipolarity, the ascendancy of China and the integration of India as a major power in Asia, and the particular regional mix of energy, commerce, and geography in the IOR. Some 80 percent of global seaborne oil and nearly one-half of world container traffic passes along its sea lanes, and the sea lanes through the and Hormuz Straits, Bab el-Mandeb and Malacca Strait, are the lifelines for the Asian industrial economies. These structural characteristics have contributed to the region's shift into one in which all three powers have come to value its role so highly that, even appearing as a bastion of defence, their interests are increasingly in conflict.

This strategic competition is playing out on four interrelated fronts: naval power projection; naval basing; port diplomacy and investment competition; and technological and intelligence contestation in marine surveillance, communications, and undersea infrastructure. The result is a more militarised, more institutionally divided, and more technologically challenged maritime

world than ever before during the post-colonial era. The phenomena of defensive measures in one capital creating insecurity in others and countermeasures creating more insecurity yet can be parsimoniously explained in terms of structural realism and the balancing process.

The implications for the security of the South Asian region are clear. The emergence of the India–Pakistan strategic balance, the marine nuclear element, increased entanglements in the Sino-Indian rivalry with Pakistan as part of Gwadar and CPEC. Smaller-state dilemmas with a very thin margin of error for Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. There has been a lack of capacity in traditional institutions of collective management, especially SAARC, and no maritime counterpart has stepped up to the plate. These dangers of arms race, of maritime accidents, of frail littoral states in the grip of political instability and strategic miscalculations, real and increasing, are no longer hypothetical.

However, structural factors and influences are by no means the sole factors determining policy. The recommendations in the previous section to renew regional maritime cooperation, strengthen multilateral security mechanisms, boost confidence-building measures, recommit to freedom of navigation, and push for cooperation instead of confrontation, offer a viable roadmap towards managing competition without triggering a crisis. Rivalry is not one that can simply be eliminated; if the stability of the South Asian region is to be entrenched in the future, it is essential to develop cooperative norms, institutions, and habits to deal with the most lethal forms of rivalry. The Indian Ocean had been a continuous kingdom of trade and culture for 2000 years. Reconstructing that cooperative nature, even as great-power competition begins to bite again, will be a factor not only in the security of South Asia but also in the security of the wider Indo-Pacific order in the years ahead.

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