

## GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAKISTAN'S MARITIME SECURITY (2021-2026)

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### ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean has emerged as a major arena of geopolitical competition due to its strategic sea lanes, abundant resources, and growing significance in global trade. This study examines the implications of regional and extra-regional rivalries for Pakistan's maritime security between 2021 and 2026. Pakistan's geostrategic location and dependence on maritime trade make the security of the Indian Ocean vital to its economic and national interests. The increasing presence of major powers, intensifying India-China competition, and evolving non-traditional security threats have created both challenges and opportunities for Pakistan's maritime sector. Using a qualitative, document-based approach, the study analyzes the impact of these geopolitical developments on Pakistan's maritime security and explores policy options for strengthening maritime governance, naval capabilities, and regional cooperation. The study concludes that effective maritime policies are essential for safeguarding Pakistan's strategic and economic interests in the Indian Ocean.

**Keywords:** Indian Ocean, Geopolitical Competition, Maritime Security, Pakistan, Strategic Competition.

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean (IO) has become one of the most strategically important regions in global politics due to its critical sea lanes, abundant natural resources, and central role in international trade and energy transportation. More than half of the world's seaborne trade and a significant portion of global energy supplies pass through the Indian Ocean, making it a major arena of geopolitical competition. In recent years, the region has witnessed growing strategic rivalry among major and regional powers, particularly the

United States, China, and India. China's expanding economic and naval presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with India's maritime modernization and the strengthening of strategic partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), has intensified competition in the region. Moreover, non-traditional security challenges, including climate change, piracy, terrorism, and transnational crimes, have further complicated the maritime security environment.

The Indian Ocean is surrounded by strategically important states, including Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, while extra-regional powers such as the United States, China, Japan, Australia, and Russia maintain significant political, economic, and military interests in the region. The involvement of these powers has transformed the Indian Ocean into an arena of strategic competition and cooperation. Regional conflicts, including the Saudi-Iran rivalry, instability in Afghanistan, and tensions in the Middle East, have also affected the security dynamics of the Indian Ocean. Consequently, maritime security has become a multidimensional issue encompassing traditional military threats as well as economic, environmental, and human security concerns.

Pakistan occupies a strategically significant position in the northern Indian Ocean, with its coastline along the Arabian Sea serving as a vital gateway for trade and connectivity. The development of Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further enhanced Pakistan's geopolitical importance while simultaneously increasing its exposure to regional rivalries and security challenges. Pakistan faces several maritime threats, including strategic competition with India, piracy, maritime terrorism, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and threats to the safety of sea lines of communication. At the same time, the evolving geopolitical environment presents opportunities for Pakistan to strengthen its maritime capabilities, expand regional economic cooperation, and enhance its role in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, understanding the challenges and opportunities arising from geopolitical competition is essential for safeguarding Pakistan's maritime security and advancing its strategic and economic interests during the period 2021-2026.

### **Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean for Pakistan**

The Indian Ocean (IO) is one of the world's most strategically important maritime regions, connecting the economies of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East through vital sea lines of

communication (SLOCs). The region facilitates a substantial share of global trade and energy transportation, making it a centre of economic activity and geopolitical competition. Due to its strategic location, abundant natural resources, and proximity to major population centres, the Indian Ocean has become an arena of intense rivalry among regional and extra-regional powers. For Pakistan, whose economy depends heavily on maritime trade and whose strategic interests are closely linked with the Arabian Sea and the broader Indian Ocean region, maintaining maritime security is a matter of national importance.

The maritime security environment of the Indian Ocean has become increasingly complex during the last decade. Traditional security concerns, such as interstate rivalries and military competition, coexist with non-traditional threats, including climate change, piracy, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. The growing strategic competition among the United States, China, and India has further complicated the security dynamics of the region. China's expanding presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's naval modernization, and the increasing militarization of strategic waterways have created new security challenges for littoral states, including Pakistan. Furthermore, political instability in the Middle East, the Saudi-Iran rivalry, and the enduring Indo-Pakistan conflict have contributed to uncertainty in the maritime domain.

For Pakistan, these challenges directly affect national security and economic development. The country's major ports, particularly Karachi and Gwadar, are essential for international trade and energy imports. Any disruption in maritime routes could significantly affect Pakistan's economy and strategic interests. Consequently, understanding the multidimensional challenges to maritime security in the Indian Ocean is essential for developing effective policies and strengthening Pakistan's maritime capabilities.

### **Changes in the Climate and Maritime Safety**

Climate change has emerged as one of the most serious threats to security in the Indian Ocean

region. Rising global temperatures and the melting of polar ice caps and glaciers have accelerated sea-level rise, posing significant environmental and security challenges to coastal states. The effects of climate change are particularly severe for countries located along the Indian Ocean, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Rising temperatures have intensified heatwaves, droughts, and irregular weather patterns, adversely affecting agricultural production and human security (Michel, 2012).

Climate change has also contributed to increased flooding and natural disasters. The irregular melting of glaciers and changing rainfall patterns have increased river flows, leading to devastating floods in many parts of South Asia. These disasters often destroy crops, damage infrastructure, and displace communities living in coastal and riverine areas. Consequently, climate change has generated food insecurity, humanitarian crises, and forced migration across the region (Michel, 2012).

For Pakistan, climate-related challenges have direct implications for maritime security. Rising sea levels threaten coastal infrastructure, including ports and economic facilities located near the Arabian Sea. The possibility of extreme weather events and environmental degradation can disrupt maritime trade and affect the operational effectiveness of naval and port installations. Furthermore, climate-induced migration and resource scarcity may generate new forms of insecurity and increase regional tensions. Therefore, climate change represents not only an environmental issue but also a significant maritime security challenge for Pakistan and other Indian Ocean states.

#### **Piracy and Maritime Security**

Piracy remains one of the major non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean. Political instability, weak governance, and poor economic conditions in certain coastal states have created an environment conducive to piracy and other criminal activities at sea. In particular, Somali pirate groups have become notorious for attacking commercial vessels, taking hostages, and demanding ransom payments (Potgieter, 2012). The rise of piracy has significantly threatened international shipping and maritime commerce.

Pirate attacks increase insurance costs, disrupt shipping schedules, and compel states and shipping companies to invest heavily in maritime security measures. The Indian Ocean's major sea lanes, including routes connecting the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, have periodically been affected by piracy activities, thereby threatening regional and global trade.

For Pakistan, piracy poses both economic and strategic concerns. Pakistan's maritime trade depends heavily on secure sea lines of communication through the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean. Any increase in piracy incidents can affect the movement of goods, increase transportation costs, and undermine investor confidence in maritime infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port. Consequently, Pakistan has actively participated in international anti-piracy initiatives and has strengthened the operational capabilities of its navy to ensure the safety of maritime routes.

#### **Smuggling of Drugs and Maritime Safety**

Drug trafficking constitutes another serious maritime security challenge in the Indian Ocean. The region is strategically located near the so-called "Golden Triangle" and other major narcotics-producing areas, making maritime routes an important channel for the transportation of illegal drugs. Criminal networks frequently use the Indian Ocean's vast and difficult-to-monitor maritime space to smuggle narcotics to markets in Asia, Europe, and Africa (Ghosh, 2004).

The trafficking of illicit drugs has serious consequences for regional stability and human security. Drug smuggling contributes to the growth of organized crime, corruption, and financial networks that can support other illegal activities, including terrorism and human trafficking. Despite efforts by international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization to restrict the production and distribution of illegal drugs, maritime trafficking continues to pose significant challenges to regional governments (Ghosh, 2004).

Pakistan's geographic location makes it particularly vulnerable to this threat. The country's coastline and proximity to major trafficking routes expose it to narcotics smuggling networks operating in the Arabian Sea. The illegal drug trade not only undermines law enforcement efforts but also threatens social stability and national security. Therefore, enhancing maritime surveillance, intelligence sharing, and regional cooperation is essential for addressing this challenge.

### **Human Trafficking and Maritime Security**

Human trafficking has emerged as another major non-traditional security concern in the Indian Ocean region. Rapid population growth, poverty, unemployment, and inadequate economic opportunities have encouraged large-scale migration from developing countries to wealthier states. Criminal organizations exploit vulnerable populations by facilitating illegal migration through maritime routes, often subjecting victims to exploitation, forced labour, and other forms of human rights abuses (Azmi, 2017).

The Indian Ocean region contains several developing and underdeveloped countries where socioeconomic challenges contribute to irregular migration patterns. Human traffickers frequently use maritime routes to transport migrants across borders illegally. Such activities are often associated with other crimes, including child labour, prostitution, and forced disappearance, thereby creating serious humanitarian and security concerns (Azmi, 2017).

For Pakistan, human trafficking poses both domestic and regional security challenges. The country's strategic location and extensive coastline make it vulnerable to illegal migration networks operating across the Arabian Sea. These activities not only threaten human security but also damage Pakistan's international image and create additional burdens for law enforcement agencies. Consequently, Pakistan requires stronger maritime governance, improved border management, and greater regional cooperation to combat human trafficking effectively.

### **Natural Disasters and Maritime Security**

Natural disasters constitute a major non-traditional maritime security challenge in the Indian Ocean region. The devastating Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster that followed the 2011 earthquake in Japan highlighted the vulnerability of coastal states to natural catastrophes. Most countries surrounding the Indian Ocean are developing states with limited technological capabilities and inadequate disaster management mechanisms. Consequently, these countries often lack modern early-warning systems, disaster-resilient infrastructure, and rapid-response rescue teams, making them highly susceptible to natural disasters (Aswani, 2022).

The Indian Ocean region frequently experiences cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, and severe storms that threaten human lives, maritime infrastructure, and economic activities. These disasters disrupt maritime transportation, damage ports and coastal facilities, and interrupt international trade and energy supply chains. Since many economies in the region depend heavily on maritime activities, natural disasters have serious economic and security implications.

For Pakistan, natural disasters present significant maritime security concerns. Climate-induced events such as cyclones and coastal flooding threaten the country's ports, fisheries, and coastal communities. The vulnerability of Karachi and Gwadar ports to extreme weather conditions could adversely affect Pakistan's trade and strategic connectivity initiatives, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Therefore, enhancing disaster preparedness, improving early-warning systems, and strengthening regional cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief have become essential components of Pakistan's maritime security strategy.

### **Terrorism and Maritime Security**

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, terrorism has emerged as one of the most serious global security challenges. The countries surrounding the Indian Ocean have experienced varying degrees of terrorism, extremism, and political violence. Regions such as Afghanistan, parts of Central Asia, Syria, and Iraq have

frequently been identified as centres of terrorist activities and extremist networks (Pfefferbaum, 2013, August). Political instability, weak governance, and prolonged conflicts have created favourable conditions for the spread of terrorism across the broader Indian Ocean region.

Maritime terrorism has become an increasing concern because terrorist organizations may target commercial vessels, naval installations, and critical maritime infrastructure. The growing naval presence of various regional and extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean has also increased the possibility of terrorist attacks against military assets and strategic facilities. Terrorist organizations may attempt to exploit maritime routes for the transportation of weapons, financing, and personnel, thereby threatening international trade and maritime stability.

Pakistan's maritime security environment is particularly sensitive to the threat of terrorism due to its strategic location and the importance of its ports and sea lines of communication. Maritime terrorism could potentially target Gwadar Port, Karachi Port, offshore installations, and naval assets, thereby disrupting economic activities and undermining national security. Consequently, Pakistan has increasingly focused on strengthening maritime domain awareness, enhancing naval capabilities, and improving intelligence coordination to counter potential maritime terrorist threats.

### **Security Issues in South Asia**

South Asia remains one of the most politically and strategically volatile regions in the world. Several countries in the region continue to face internal conflicts, separatist movements, ethnic tensions, and political instability. India has experienced numerous separatist and insurgent movements, while Nepal and Sri Lanka have also confronted internal security challenges. The Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India remains one of the most significant sources of regional instability and continues to influence the security environment of the Indian Ocean (Mustafa, 2020).

Afghanistan's prolonged instability has generated several spillover effects, including terrorism, refugee movements, and transnational criminal

activities that directly affect neighbouring states. Similarly, the activities of militant groups and separatist movements in Pakistan have created additional security challenges for regional stability. Security concerns related to Balochistan and other insurgent movements continue to have implications for Pakistan's maritime security, particularly because of the strategic importance of Gwadar Port and CPEC (Mustafa, 2020).

The increasing involvement of external powers, especially the United States, China, and Russia, has further complicated South Asia's security environment. Strategic competition among these powers has altered the regional balance of power and intensified geopolitical rivalries in the Indian Ocean. For Pakistan, these developments create both opportunities and challenges, requiring a balanced and comprehensive maritime security strategy.

### **Security Concerns in Southeast Asia**

Although most Southeast Asian countries are not directly located on the Indian Ocean, developments in the region have important implications for Indian Ocean security. Humanitarian crises, political instability, and ethnic conflicts in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos have created significant security and humanitarian challenges. Likewise, political unrest in Bangladesh and Thailand and concerns regarding extremist movements in Indonesia have generated broader regional security implications.

The strategic significance of Southeast Asia is largely associated with major maritime routes and strategic chokepoints, particularly the Malacca Strait, through which a considerable proportion of global trade and energy shipments pass. Any instability in this region can directly affect maritime commerce and navigation in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, disputes in the South China Sea and tensions involving China, Taiwan, and other regional actors have contributed to a broader atmosphere of strategic uncertainty (Chaudhary, 2022).

For Pakistan, instability in Southeast Asia could indirectly affect maritime trade, regional connectivity projects, and the security of sea lines

of communication. The interconnected nature of global maritime trade means that disruptions in one region can have significant consequences for the entire Indian Ocean. Therefore, Pakistan has a strong interest in maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia and supporting cooperative regional security mechanisms.

### **Instability in Eastern Africa**

Eastern Africa represents another important source of maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean. The region is characterized by widespread poverty, political instability, weak governance structures, and underdevelopment. Several countries in Eastern Africa continue to face ethnic conflicts, religious tensions, and economic difficulties that contribute to regional insecurity. Somalia, in particular, has long been considered a failed state and has become synonymous with piracy and maritime crime in the Indian Ocean (Atta-Asamoah, 2015).

Political instability in Eastern Africa has numerous spillover effects, including the growth of organized crime, illegal migration, arms trafficking, and piracy. The region's abundant natural resources and emerging consumer markets have also intensified competition among regional and external powers seeking economic and strategic influence. Such competition often contributes to political tensions and instability (Atta-Asamoah, 2015).

For Pakistan, instability in Eastern Africa poses indirect but significant maritime security challenges. The Arabian Sea and the western Indian Ocean are important routes for Pakistan's trade and energy imports. Any deterioration in security conditions in Eastern Africa can disrupt maritime transportation, increase shipping costs, and threaten regional stability. Therefore, Pakistan has an interest in supporting international efforts aimed at promoting stability, combating piracy, and enhancing maritime cooperation in the western Indian Ocean.

### **Security Dynamics of Indo-Pak Outstanding Disputes**

India and Pakistan have remained strategic rivals since their independence in 1947, and their

adversarial relationship continues to shape the security dynamics of South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Both countries are nuclear-armed states and have fought several wars and numerous military confrontations, making their relationship one of the world's most dangerous nuclear rivalries. Despite various confidence-building measures, several unresolved disputes continue to generate tensions between the two states, including the Kashmir dispute, the Sir Creek issue, the Siachen Glacier conflict, and disagreements over water sharing under the Indus Waters Treaty (Hussain, 2019).

The Kashmir dispute remains the central source of instability between India and Pakistan and is often described as a potential nuclear flashpoint. Since the revocation of the special constitutional status of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, bilateral relations have remained tense. Although the ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control (LoC), reaffirmed in 2021, has reduced direct military exchanges, political and diplomatic relations between the two countries continue to be strained. Periodic allegations of cross-border militancy, military modernization, and growing strategic mistrust continue to raise concerns about the possibility of escalation (Hussain, 2019).

The maritime dimension of Indo-Pak rivalry has become increasingly significant in recent years. Both countries have expanded their naval capabilities and enhanced maritime surveillance systems in the Arabian Sea. India's growing naval modernization, including the acquisition of advanced aircraft carriers, submarines, and missile systems, has altered the regional balance of power. In response, Pakistan has accelerated the modernization of the Pakistan Navy, strengthened its maritime partnerships with China and other regional actors, and enhanced the security of its coastal and offshore assets. The strategic importance of Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further intensified maritime competition in the northern Indian Ocean. Consequently, the enduring Indo-Pak rivalry remains one of the most significant challenges to maritime security and regional

stability in the Indian Ocean during the period 2021-2026.

### **Sino-Indian Security Concerns**

China and India have long competed over issues related to territory, geopolitics, economic influence, and regional leadership. Although economic relations between the two countries have expanded over the years, strategic mistrust and unresolved border disputes continue to dominate their bilateral relations. The border clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020 significantly deteriorated relations and accelerated military deployments along the disputed Himalayan frontier. Since then, both countries have continued to strengthen their military infrastructure and maintain substantial troop deployments along their borders.

The strategic rivalry between China and India has increasingly expanded into the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean. China's growing economic and strategic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Maritime Silk Road, and investments in ports across the Indian Ocean region have generated considerable concern in India. Chinese investments in ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and facilities in East Africa are often perceived by Indian policymakers as part of a broader strategy to expand Beijing's strategic influence in the region (Yang, 2015).

In response, India has significantly enhanced its naval capabilities and strengthened strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia under the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). India has also increased its maritime cooperation with France and several Indian Ocean littoral states, reflecting its ambition to become a leading security provider in the region. The intensifying competition between China and India has contributed to the militarization of the Indian Ocean, increased naval deployments, and intensified strategic competition over critical sea lanes and maritime infrastructure.

For Pakistan, the Sino-Indian rivalry presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, Pakistan's strategic partnership with China and

the development of CPEC and Gwadar Port provide significant economic and geopolitical opportunities. On the other hand, growing Sino-Indian competition increases strategic polarization in the Indian Ocean and may expose Pakistan to heightened regional tensions. The emergence of competing strategic alignments, including the QUAD and China's expanding maritime partnerships, has transformed the Indian Ocean into a major theatre of great-power competition. Consequently, the evolving Sino-Indian rivalry has become one of the defining factors shaping maritime security dynamics in the Indian Ocean during 2025-2026 and carries significant implications for Pakistan's strategic and maritime interests.

### **Iran-Saudi Rivalry and its Implications for Indian Ocean Security**

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has long been one of the defining features of Middle Eastern geopolitics and has significant implications for the security of the Indian Ocean region. The competition is driven by geopolitical ambitions, ideological differences, and strategic interests rather than purely sectarian considerations. Iran, a predominantly Shiite state, and Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority monarchy, have competed for regional influence since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Their rivalry has also been shaped by differing relationships with major powers, as Saudi Arabia has traditionally maintained close security ties with the United States, whereas Iran has developed strategic partnerships with Russia and China (Tehsin, 2018).

Although diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were restored in 2023 through Chinese mediation, strategic mistrust remains. The conflict in Gaza since October 2023 and the growing tensions between Iran and Israel have once again increased uncertainty in the Middle East. Any escalation involving Iran could threaten the security of the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial portion of the world's oil trade passes. Such instability would directly affect maritime commerce and energy security in the

Indian Ocean and pose significant challenges for energy-importing countries, including Pakistan.

### **The Yemeni Crisis and Maritime Security**

The Yemeni crisis remains one of the most significant security challenges affecting the Indian Ocean region. Since 2015, Yemen has been the site of a proxy conflict involving the Saudi-backed government and the Iran-supported Houthi movement. Although several ceasefire initiatives have reduced the intensity of fighting, the humanitarian crisis remains severe, with millions of people displaced and dependent on international assistance (Laub, 2016).

The strategic importance of Yemen stems from its proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Since late 2023, Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea have significantly disrupted global maritime trade, forcing many shipping companies to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope. These developments have increased transportation costs and highlighted the vulnerability of global supply chains. Consequently, the Yemeni crisis has emerged as a major maritime security concern for the broader Indian Ocean region.

### **The Syrian and Iraqi Security Dilemmas**

Although the intensity of the Syrian civil war has declined, Syria remains politically fragmented and continues to experience periodic violence and foreign intervention. The Syrian conflict facilitated the rise of extremist organizations, particularly the Islamic State (IS), whose activities had regional and global security implications (Qaddour, 2013). Similarly, Iraq continues to face political instability, the activities of armed militias, and the lingering threat of extremist groups despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State.

The security situations in Syria and Iraq continue to influence the broader Middle East by intensifying geopolitical competition among regional and international powers, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and the United States (Bennis, 2005). The persistence of instability in these countries affects regional energy markets, maritime trade routes, and the

overall security environment of the Indian Ocean. For Pakistan, instability in the Middle East has important implications for energy security, overseas employment, and maritime trade, thereby making these conflicts significant components of the broader maritime security landscape of the Indian Ocean during 2025–2026.

### **Arab-Israel Issues and Their Implications for Indian Ocean Security**

The Arab-Israeli conflict remains one of the most enduring and consequential disputes in international politics. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, several Arab states have opposed Israeli policies toward the Palestinians and have fought multiple wars with Israel. Although Egypt and Jordan normalized relations with Israel through peace agreements and several Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, established diplomatic relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords, the Palestinian question remains unresolved (Brecher, 2017).

The conflict entered a new and highly volatile phase following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent military operations in Gaza. The war has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, widespread destruction, and regional instability. The conflict has also increased tensions across the Middle East, involving state and non-state actors and raising concerns about a broader regional confrontation. For the Indian Ocean region, prolonged instability in the Middle East threatens energy security, maritime trade, and the safety of critical sea routes connecting the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

### **Iran-Israel Disputes**

The rivalry between Iran and Israel has become one of the most significant strategic confrontations in the Middle East. Iran does not recognize Israel and has historically supported groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Conversely, Israel has viewed Iran's regional influence and nuclear ambitions as major security threats and has consistently sought to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (Khatami, 2019).

The rivalry escalated dramatically during 2024 and 2025, when direct military exchanges occurred between the two countries, marking an unprecedented shift from indirect confrontation to open hostilities. Israeli operations against Iranian military assets and Iran's retaliatory missile and drone attacks significantly heightened regional tensions. The possibility of further escalation remains a major concern for international security.

The implications for the Indian Ocean are considerable. Any large-scale confrontation between Iran and Israel could disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints, through which a significant share of global oil and gas supplies passes. Such disruptions would directly affect global energy markets, maritime trade, and the economies of Indian Ocean littoral states, including Pakistan.

### **The Palestinian Question**

The Palestinian issue remains one of the longest unresolved conflicts in modern history and continues to shape Middle Eastern politics. Palestinians seek an independent state based on internationally recognized principles of self-determination, while disputes over territory, settlements, security, and the status of Jerusalem have prevented a lasting settlement. The humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories, particularly in Gaza, has deteriorated significantly in recent years, attracting widespread international concern (Cattan, 2022).

The Gaza conflict since 2023 has generated one of the most severe humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century, resulting in large-scale displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and significant civilian casualties. The continuation of the conflict has intensified political polarization across the Middle East and increased anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiments in many parts of the Muslim world.

From a maritime security perspective, the Palestinian issue has implications that extend beyond the Levant. The conflict has contributed to regional instability and has indirectly affected maritime trade through the Red Sea and the Bab

el-Mandeb Strait due to attacks on commercial shipping and increasing geopolitical tensions. Consequently, the unresolved Palestinian question remains a significant source of instability with direct and indirect consequences for the security of the Indian Ocean region. For Pakistan, developments in Palestine are important not only because of political and humanitarian considerations but also due to their potential impact on regional stability, energy security, and maritime commerce during the period 2021-2026.

### **Post-2021 Afghanistan and Its Implications for Pakistan's Maritime Security**

Afghanistan has experienced decades of political instability, armed conflict, and humanitarian crises. The Soviet invasion in 1979, the subsequent civil war, the rise of the Taliban, and the two-decade U.S.-led military intervention transformed Afghanistan into a focal point of regional and international security concerns. Following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in August 2021, the Taliban regained control of the country and established an interim government. Although the end of large-scale military operations reduced direct conflict, Afghanistan continues to face severe economic challenges, humanitarian difficulties, and security concerns arising from the activities of extremist groups, particularly the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (Cordesman, 2019).

The political transition in Afghanistan has generated important geopolitical implications for South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean region. Regional powers, including Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and India, have adopted different approaches toward engagement with the Taliban government, creating new patterns of competition and cooperation. Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia makes its stability essential for regional connectivity, trade, and energy projects.

For Pakistan, developments in Afghanistan have direct implications for national and maritime security. A stable Afghanistan could facilitate regional connectivity initiatives, strengthen trade corridors, and enhance the economic potential of Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC). Conversely, continued instability, terrorism, refugee flows, and cross-border security threats could undermine Pakistan's internal security and divert strategic resources away from maritime development. Therefore, the post-2021 situation in Afghanistan represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Pakistan's broader security and maritime interests in the Indian Ocean region during the period 2021-2026.

### **China's Belt and Road Initiative and Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean**

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical and economic developments in the Indian Ocean region. Through investments in ports, roads, railways, and energy infrastructure, China has sought to enhance regional connectivity and secure its trade and energy routes. The Maritime Silk Road, a key component of the BRI, has increased China's economic and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean through projects such as Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and other infrastructure investments across Asia and Africa (Rolland, 2017).

However, China's expanding presence has generated concerns among several regional and extra-regional powers. The United States, India, Japan, and Australia perceive some aspects of the BRI as a challenge to the existing regional balance of power. Consequently, strategic initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Indo-Pacific strategy have gained momentum as mechanisms to balance China's growing influence. This strategic competition has intensified military modernization, increased naval deployments, and contributed to the militarization of the Indian Ocean. For Pakistan, the BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) present significant economic and strategic opportunities, but they also expose the country to intensifying geopolitical rivalries in the region.

### **Russia's Involvement in the Indian Ocean**

Russia has sought to increase its political, economic, and military engagement in the Indian Ocean region in recent years. Historically, Russia has maintained close strategic relations with India and has remained one of New Delhi's principal defence partners. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, Moscow has further diversified its diplomatic and economic partnerships in Asia and the Middle East to counter Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Muraviev, 2021).

Russia has also strengthened cooperation with Iran and expanded its engagement with several Middle Eastern and African states. Although Russia's direct naval presence in the Indian Ocean remains limited compared to that of the United States and China, it continues to pursue strategic access to warm-water regions and maritime routes. The growing interaction among Russia, China, and Iran has added another dimension to great-power competition in the Indian Ocean and contributed to a climate of strategic uncertainty.

### **Western Interests in the Indian Ocean**

The Indian Ocean occupies a central position in Western strategic thinking because of its critical sea lanes, abundant energy resources, and growing markets. The United States and its European allies view the region as essential for maintaining freedom of navigation, protecting international trade routes, and preserving a favourable balance of power. A substantial proportion of global energy supplies and commercial goods destined for Western economies pass through the Indian Ocean's strategic chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Malacca Strait (Zakheim, 1980).

The rise of China and the growing influence of other regional powers have increased Western engagement in the Indian Ocean through security partnerships, naval deployments, and economic initiatives. Consequently, the region has become a major arena of great-power competition. For Pakistan, these geopolitical developments create both opportunities and challenges, requiring a balanced foreign policy that protects its maritime

interests while benefiting from regional economic and connectivity initiatives.

### **Opportunities for Pakistan's Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean**

Despite growing geopolitical competition and security challenges in the Indian Ocean (IO), Pakistan possesses significant opportunities to strengthen its maritime security and improve its economic and strategic position. Owing to its geostrategic location, expanding maritime infrastructure, and increasing regional engagement, Pakistan can transform itself into an important maritime and economic actor in the Indian Ocean during the period 2021-2026.

### **Strategic Location and Economic Connectivity**

Pakistan's geographical position is one of its greatest strategic advantages. Located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, Pakistan serves as a natural gateway connecting different regions. The country's coastline along the Arabian Sea and the development of Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have significantly increased its maritime importance. Gwadar Port has the potential to become a major regional trade and logistics hub by facilitating transit trade and improving connectivity with Central Asia, China, and the Middle East. Through the development of modern port facilities and secure sea lines of communication, Pakistan can attract foreign investment, increase trade, and diversify its economy. Furthermore, Gwadar's location near the Strait of Hormuz enables Pakistan to play a greater role in monitoring and securing one of the world's most important energy routes.

### **Regional Maritime Cooperation**

The changing security environment in the Indian Ocean has created opportunities for greater regional maritime cooperation. Pakistan has actively participated in multilateral initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the AMAN multinational naval exercises. These platforms have strengthened Pakistan's naval diplomacy and enhanced cooperation with regional and extra-regional states.

Pakistan's partnerships with countries such as China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have contributed to the modernization of its maritime capabilities. Cooperation in naval training, technology transfer, and intelligence sharing has improved Pakistan's capacity to address challenges such as piracy, maritime terrorism, and transnational crime. By promoting cooperative security arrangements, Pakistan can further establish itself as a responsible stakeholder in the Indian Ocean.

### **Opportunities in the Blue Economy**

The blue economy offers enormous opportunities for Pakistan's economic development. The country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) contains considerable untapped resources, including fisheries, marine minerals, offshore energy reserves, and tourism potential. Sustainable utilization of these resources can contribute significantly to economic growth, employment generation, and poverty reduction in coastal areas. Pakistan also has the potential to develop offshore oil and gas resources and expand its fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Investment in port services, shipbuilding, marine biotechnology, and coastal tourism can further strengthen the country's maritime economy and reduce its dependence on traditional economic sectors.

### **Geopolitical Opportunities amid Great Power Competition**

The growing competition among major powers in the Indian Ocean also provides opportunities for Pakistan. The strategic partnership between Pakistan and China, particularly through CPEC, has increased infrastructure investment and economic cooperation. At the same time, Pakistan has maintained constructive relations with the Gulf states, Türkiye, and other regional actors, enabling it to pursue a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy.

Pakistan can also play a constructive diplomatic role in promoting regional peace and stability. By supporting dialogue and regional cooperation, Pakistan can improve its international standing and strengthen its strategic importance in the Indian Ocean region.

### **Naval Modernization and Maritime Capacity Building**

Pakistan has made considerable progress in modernizing its naval capabilities. The induction of advanced frigates, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, and unmanned systems has strengthened the operational capacity of the Pakistan Navy. Cooperation with China and Türkiye has enhanced Pakistan's ability to protect its Exclusive Economic Zone, secure maritime trade routes, and counter non-traditional security threats. Continued investment in maritime domain awareness, coastal surveillance systems, and naval infrastructure will further improve Pakistan's maritime defence posture and contribute to regional stability.

### **Climate Adaptation and Maritime Resilience**

Although climate change poses significant risks to coastal states, it also provides opportunities for Pakistan to develop maritime resilience and sustainable coastal management strategies. Investments in disaster management systems, coastal protection projects, and renewable energy resources such as offshore wind and wave energy can strengthen Pakistan's capacity to deal with climate-related challenges.

Pakistan can also cooperate with other Indian Ocean states on climate adaptation, environmental protection, and disaster response mechanisms. Such initiatives would not only enhance maritime security but also improve Pakistan's role as a responsible regional actor. The evolving geopolitical environment of the Indian Ocean presents Pakistan with substantial opportunities alongside existing challenges. By utilizing its strategic location, strengthening regional cooperation, promoting the blue economy, modernizing its naval capabilities, and adopting sustainable maritime policies, Pakistan can significantly enhance its maritime security and advance its economic and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean during the period 2021-2026.

### **Conclusion**

The Indian Ocean has become a major arena of geopolitical competition, strategic rivalry, and economic interdependence. For Pakistan, maritime security is closely linked to national

security, economic development, and regional connectivity. The study demonstrates that Pakistan faces numerous maritime challenges, including Indo-Pak tensions, great-power competition, instability in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and non-traditional threats such as climate change, piracy, terrorism, and transnational crime. These developments have significantly influenced Pakistan's maritime environment during the period 2021-2026.

At the same time, the changing geopolitical landscape presents important opportunities for Pakistan. The development of Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the expansion of regional maritime cooperation, the growth of the blue economy, and the modernization of the Pakistan Navy have enhanced the country's strategic and economic potential. Pakistan's geostrategic location enables it to serve as a bridge connecting South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the wider Indian Ocean region.

Therefore, Pakistan must adopt a comprehensive maritime strategy that combines naval modernization, effective maritime governance, regional diplomacy, and sustainable economic development. By effectively addressing existing challenges and capitalizing on emerging opportunities, Pakistan can strengthen its maritime security and play a more significant role in promoting stability, connectivity, and prosperity in the Indian Ocean region.

### **Recommendations**

- 1. Strengthen Naval and Maritime Capabilities:** Pakistan should continue modernizing its naval forces by investing in advanced technologies, including submarines, frigates, unmanned systems, and maritime surveillance capabilities. Regular naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and cooperation with strategic partners such as China and Türkiye should be expanded to improve maritime preparedness and protect sea lines of communication.
- 2. Promote Regional Maritime Cooperation:** Pakistan should actively engage in regional and international maritime forums,

including the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the AMAN naval exercises. Greater cooperation with neighbouring countries and major powers can enhance information sharing, counter piracy and terrorism, and promote collective maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

3. **Develop the Blue Economy:** Pakistan should formulate a comprehensive blue economy strategy focusing on fisheries, aquaculture, coastal tourism, offshore energy, and shipbuilding industries. Sustainable utilization of marine resources can generate employment, increase exports, and strengthen economic resilience. Special attention should be given to exploring offshore hydrocarbon resources and improving port-related infrastructure.

4. **Improve Maritime Governance and Institutional Coordination:** The government should adopt a comprehensive national maritime security policy and strengthen coordination among the Pakistan Navy, Pakistan Maritime Security Agency, and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs. Updating maritime laws and enhancing maritime domain awareness are essential for effectively addressing illegal fishing, smuggling, human trafficking, and other transnational crimes.

5. **Enhance Climate Resilience and Coastal Protection:** Pakistan should prioritize climate adaptation measures by investing in resilient coastal infrastructure, disaster management systems, and renewable energy projects. Cooperation with international organizations and regional states on environmental protection and disaster response mechanisms can help mitigate climate-related risks and ensure the long-term security of Pakistan's maritime interests.

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