



## RIVALRY BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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### ABSTRAK

*Samudra Hindia mempunyai peran penting bagi dunia internasional, khususnya bagi negara-negara di kawasan tersebut. Mulai dari letaknya yang strategis dan berbagai keunggulannya, Samudra Hindia telah menarik perhatian banyak pihak, terutama dalam mengembangkan kepentingannya masing-masing. Artikel ini berfokus pada rivalitas antara Tiongkok dan India di Samudra Hindia. Persaingan keduanya sudah berlangsung sangat lama, mulai dari pembagian wilayah hingga berlanjut ke kawasan Samudra Hindia. India menganggap dirinya sebagai "pemilik Samudra Hindia" dan merasa terganggu dengan aktivitas Tiongkok. Kedua negara berupaya menjalin kerja sama dengan beberapa negara di kawasan Samudra Hindia guna mendapatkan kekuatan dalam menjalankan kepentingannya. Tiongkok menilai Samudra Hindia mempunyai potensi besar untuk meningkatkan kepentingan ekonominya. Oleh karenanya, Tiongkok dinilai berupaya keras mengembangkan program mereka. Melalui perspektif realis, penelitian ini melihat bahwa kedua negara bertindak demi kepentingan nasional dan berusaha mempertahankan atau meningkatkan kekuatan mereka di tatanan internasional. Peneliti menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan analisis deskriptif dalam penelitian ini. Teknik pengumpulan datanya menggunakan penelitian kepustakaan dari berbagai jurnal, artikel, berita, dan skripsi yang isinya relevan dengan topik pembahasan. Kedua negara tersebut ternyata bergantung pada Samudra Hindia, di mana keduanya mempunyai kepentingan ekonomi masing-masing. Hal ini kemudian menimbulkan persaingan antara keduanya yang tentunya akan berdampak pada negara-negara sekitar, termasuk negara-negara yang menjalin kerja sama dengan Tiongkok atau India.*

*Kata Kunci: Samudra Hindia, India, Tiongkok, Rivalitas, Realisme*

### ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean plays an important role in the international world, especially for countries in the region. Starting from its strategic location and various advantages, the Indian Ocean has attracted the attention of many parties, especially those developing their respective interests. This article focuses on the rivalry between China and India in the Indian Ocean. The competition between the two has been going on for a very long time, starting from the division of territory to continuing to the Indian Ocean region. India considers itself the "owner of the Indian Ocean" and is disturbed by China's activities. Both countries are trying to establish cooperation with several countries in the Indian Ocean region to gain strength in carrying out their interests. China considers the Indian Ocean great potential to increase its economic interests. Therefore, China is considered to be trying hard to develop its programs. From a realist perspective, this study sees that both countries act in the national interest and seek to maintain or increase their power in the international order. The researcher uses a qualitative method with descriptive analysis in this study. The data collection technique uses library research from various journals, articles, news, and theses whose contents are relevant

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to the topic of discussion. It was found that both countries depend on the Indian Ocean, where both have their economic interests. This then creates competition between the two which will certainly have an impact on surrounding countries, including countries that cooperate with China or India.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, India, China, Rivalry, Realism

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## **BACKGROUND**

India and China have seen significant growth in recent years, both globally and in their respective regions. As we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the strategic rivalry between the two dominant countries in Asia is intensifying. The two share a 4,056-kilometer border. The rivalry between India and China, particularly given the substantial economic stature of one within the Indo-Pacific region, is poised to significantly influence the broader regional dynamics. This is especially pertinent in light of China's recent ascendance, which has fundamentally altered both regional and global power configurations. China's recent rise has fundamentally changed regional and global power structure. China and India have deepened their close ties as they seek to bring the region closer to their respective interests. There are currently border issues, territorial conflicts, and international aspirations between China and India. Both are big markets with serious concerns about safe and affordable trade routes and energy security.

Historical, strategic, and economic factors all play a part in the rivalry between China and India in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, China and India have a long history of bilateral relations, particularly in the areas of trade and investment cooperation. However, the two adjacent countries have been obliged to take a strategic approach to competition rather than cooperation due to the protracted border conflict, disagreements, and economic and security difficulties. In terms of the nature of their relationship, India and China are restricted to one another, have opposing strategic goals and objectives, are ideologically opposed, lack mutual trust, and are always competing with one another.

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China implements a competitive strategy to prevent India from becoming stronger and uses every instrument at its disposal to obstruct India's advancement in terms of both countries' strategic interests. Since the United States (US), Japan, India, and Australia have close economic, political, security, and defense relations, this hinders the development of regional cooperation between India and other countries. India claims that China is the primary threat to its security and development. Despite always being in a weaker position than China, India has never let its guard down against China, does not trust China, and silently resists China. In some ways, the relationship between China and India in the Indian Ocean serves as a "mirror" of their larger strategic partnership, which include aspects of rivalry, collaboration, and cohabitation (Chuong et al., 2022).

One of the main arenas of competition between India and China is the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is vital to both countries, as it is a major route for global trade and energy supplies, especially for India, which considers the region its natural sphere of influence due to its geographic location. For India, the ocean is vital to its economic and security interests, as more than 95% of its trade volume and 80% of its value passes through it, and the majority of energy imports that drive its economy pass through the region (Jaishankar, 2016).

As competition in the Indian Ocean increases, China is utilizing infrastructure plans and maritime diplomacy to bolster its influence. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has managed to secure access to important ports in countries such as Pakistan (Gwadar Port), Sri Lanka (Hambantota Port), and Myanmar. This infrastructure development is not only aimed at increasing trade but also provides strategic advantages for China by creating geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean region. This presence is considered a step to expand control over vital trade routes connecting Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Consolidation of Chinese Communist Party authority in strategically important areas, coupled with the BRI infrastructure

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initiative and the resulting financial obligations on coastal states, have placed India and other countries in a very difficult position. Maritime transport is the cheapest and most efficient way to move large quantities of goods, and the Indian Ocean sea lanes provide global access to food, minerals, precious metals, and energy resources.

In addition, China has expanded its activities in the maritime division of the BRI initiative by building commercial ports and related infrastructure in South Asian countries, conducting naval exercises with Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, and taking advantage of the increasing economic interdependence of other countries to promote its political ties. Recent decades have seen a considerable increase in China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean, which could build military supremacy in far-off waters. Some nations are concerned about China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean, particularly India, which sees China's actions as a strategic threat to its power in the region. The Indian Ocean is also a "major hotspot of competitive tensions"(Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2023). This raises concerns for India. For India, the Indian Ocean is a vital region for its national interests, especially in terms of energy security and trade. Since the Indian Ocean water lanes carry around 80% of India's energy imports, China's presence in this region is viewed as a strategic threat. India is concerned that China's maritime infrastructure investment in neighboring countries could turn into military bases, which would ultimately disrupt the balance of power in the region.

In reaction to China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean, India has been bolstering maritime security cooperation with nations such as the US, Japan, and Australia through a strategic alliance called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The Quad is an informal platform for upholding the freedom, openness, and adherence to international law in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad is a crucial instrument for India in limiting China's maritime aspirations in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific region. Through the Indian Ocean Rim Association

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(IORA) forum, India is enhancing bilateral collaboration with the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean in addition to the Quad. India hopes to strengthen regional collaboration in disaster relief, economic growth, and maritime security through IORA. In order to improve its military capabilities and preserve stability in the Indian Ocean, India also participates actively in cooperative naval exercises with nations in the region.

However, India-China strategic competition in the Indian Ocean is not always confrontational. In some sectors, the two countries are still economically interdependent. Bilateral trade between India and China continues to grow, despite political tensions. India and China also share an interest in ensuring trade routes remain open and secure, given the importance of the Indo-Pacific region to the global economy. However, amid this strategic competition, India-China bilateral relations remain fraught with uncertainty. Despite efforts to maintain stability, such as high-level meetings between the two countries' leaders, tensions on the Himalayan border, as well as conflicting geopolitical ambitions, continue to be potential sources of conflict. In addition, the growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean is likely to trigger more tensions in the future, especially if India feels threatened by China's maritime dominance.

The Indian Ocean lines between Asia, Africa, and Antarctica. It is the third largest ocean in the world after the Atlantic and Pacific. It makes up around one-fifth of the earth's ocean surface. The Indian Ocean is a vital transit route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and a waterway that connects four continents. Western nations like Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and England have fought to gain control of the Indian Ocean throughout history because they understand its significance. Following the discovery of the Cape Route, the Portuguese established a trading hub in Goa and seized control of key regions in the Indian Ocean. They controlled the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf (especially Socotra and Ormuz), and the

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Strait of Malacca. Portuguese control over the Indian Ocean trade ended in 1641 with the Dutch conquest of Malacca. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian Ocean emerged as a key maritime zone and a new political battleground for the major powers due to its strategic security and economic importance. In addition, the Indian Ocean is a very active maritime commercial corridor, covering about 25% of all international ports and handling almost 20% of the world's total import and export cargo (Brewster, 2018).

Indo-Pacific is the region that includes the Pacific and Indian Oceans. As the Indo-Pacific region emerged as the world's political, economic, and strategic hub in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, major powers' focus in the maritime sector changed from the Atlantic-Pacific region to the Indo-Pacific region. Due to its geostrategic interests and priceless resources, this region swiftly turned into a battleground for major nations. Known as the "pioneer of the theory of naval power", Alfred Thayer Mahan claimed that dominion over Asia would result from control of the Indian Ocean. The ocean is an important element that opens access to the seven seas. The fate of the earth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be determined by its water resources (Scott, 2006).

The researcher takes a realism stance when examining the aforementioned problems. This method can serve as one of the theoretical underpinnings for examining China-India interactions, particularly in light of their rivalry for influence and power in the Indian Ocean. The idea of power struggle, which is central to realism, holds that nations behave in their own best interests and try to preserve or expand their influence in the international system. This argument is highly pertinent to the competition between China and India. The Indian Ocean dispute between China and India can be viewed as a major struggle for influence and power from a realist standpoint. Both countries have great strategic interests in maritime trade routes, energy resources, and the geopolitical position of the region. Ultimately, India-China strategic competition in the Indian Ocean reflects the broader dynamics

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in international relations in the Indo-Pacific. Both countries have great ambitions to establish their influence in the region, and how they manage this competition will have a significant impact on regional stability. With the changes in global power that are occurring, the Indian Ocean will continue to be an important center of geopolitical competition, where India and China seeking to achieve their strategic goals while maintaining the balance of power in the region. Therefore, it is important to look at the landscape of the situation in the Indian Ocean, especially highlighting the attitudes of China and India.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this writing, references to previous research are very important to understand the historical and contemporary context regarding the geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean, as well as how the competition between China and India shapes regional security. Some relevant studies are used as a theoretical basis.

Sugata Bose's research in his book *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (2009) highlights the importance of the Indian Ocean as a route of interaction and exchange between people, goods, and ideas. According to Bose, from 1850 to 1950, this region functioned as a place for social, political, and economic relations involving various communities from the East to Africa and South Asia. This research is relevant because it shows that the Indian Ocean is not only an arena for geopolitical battles, but also a place where different communities build complex social networks, and strengthen national identities and goals (Bose, 2009). In this context, Bose's views become the basis for a historical understanding of how the region continues to play a vital role in international relations, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In addition, research by Timothy Doyle in his article *Blue Economy and the Indian Ocean Rim* (2018) describes the Indian Ocean as a collaborative development area, especially in the context of the blue economy. According to Doyle, the maritime

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potential of the Indian Ocean is an important concern in improving the geo-economy, geo-environment, and security of the region. The focus on the blue economy shows an increasing awareness among the coastal and island countries of the potential of the marine environment as an economic driver. In Doyle's analysis, the development of this region is not only collaborative but also influenced by geopolitical dynamics that include strategic competition between major countries, especially China and India (Doyle, 2018). This adds a new dimension to how we understand the interaction between economics and security in the Indian Ocean.

Gurpreet S. Khurana's research entitled *China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications* (2008) focused on China's strategic influence in this area through the concept of "String of Pearls". This idea explains how China increased its military power by using Indian Ocean shipping lanes. Given the region's strategic importance to both nations, Khurana's research demonstrates that China's presence in the Indian Ocean has a substantial impact on India's security. Although Khurana highlights that many claims regarding China's strategy in the Indian Ocean are still speculative, this research provides important insights into how India and China view this region as a competitive arena that determines regional security (Khurana, 2008).

David Brewster's study in *An Indian Ocean Dilemma: Sino-Indian Rivalry and China's Strategic Vulnerability in the Indian Ocean* (2015) explains the strategic difficulties between China and India in the Indian Ocean. Brewster focuses on the strategic issues that China is facing in the region due to increasing competition with India. While short-term solutions may be found, this study underlines how tensions between these two major powers are difficult to avoid, especially in the context of strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean. This study is important in explaining the strategic vulnerabilities experienced by China and its impact on bilateral relations with India (Brewster, 2015).



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Finally, the research of Tran Long, Yen Tran, Hien Huynh, and Hiep Tran in *Competition of Strategy between China and India in the Indian Ocean Nowadays* (2023) describes how the competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean remains tight in all areas, from military to geo-economics. This study highlights that both countries are trying to strengthen their regional supremacy to overcome each other's dominance. This competition, according to Tran et al., is a competition between regimes that are trying to maximize their influence in the Indian Ocean, rather than allowing the dominance of other countries, such as the US, to strengthen (Long et al., 2023).

Overall, these studies provide a highly relevant historical and strategic context for understanding the strategic competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean. This competition not only covers geopolitical and military aspects but also reflects the increasingly complex economic and security dynamics in the region.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study combines a descriptive analysis method with a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was selected in order to offer a thorough comprehension of the phenomenon of India-China strategic competition in the Indian Ocean. This descriptive method aims to explain the facts and relationships between the events being investigated so that the research results can be presented accurately and objectively without any exaggeration or reduction of the facts (Ridwan, 2020).

Qualitative methods place researchers as the main instrument in data collection, focusing on contextual understanding of the data obtained. Data collection is carried out through triangulation techniques, which are a combination of several methods to obtain valid information. Triangulation includes document analysis, interviews with geopolitical experts, and literature reviews on geopolitical issues in

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the Indian Ocean. By using this technique, the data obtained is verified through various sources to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Data analysis is done inductively, where researcher collect data from various sources and then compile patterns, themes, and relationships that emerge from the data. This allows researcher to understand the dynamics of competition between China and India in the region more comprehensively. Inductive analysis also allows research to focus on specific phenomena without making overly broad generalizations.

In addition, this study also uses a literature review as one of the important data collection methods. This study aims to understand previous theories and research that are relevant to the topic of strategic competition between India and China. The literature review process includes the systematic collection and analysis of information obtained from various books, journals, and previous studies (Adlini et al., 2022). The literature review provides a strong theoretical basis for this research and helps clarify the geopolitical context in the Indian Ocean.

This study attempts to provide an accurate and objective description of the strategic relationship between China and India, taking into account the political, economic, and historical factors that influence the dynamics in the Indian Ocean. It is expected that the study's findings will significantly advance scholarly knowledge of strategic competition in this region.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Importance of the Indian Ocean for India**

Many nations currently place a high value on the Indian Ocean. It plays a significant role in international trade, particularly in the energy sector. The coastal areas are large, crowded, and include some of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Given that India is the most populated nation and that it serves as a

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geopolitical platform, the Indian Ocean Basin is extremely significant to India (Tellis et al., 2017).

Due to the geographical features of the ocean, maritime management is heightened in five key locations: the Cape of Good Hope at the southernmost tip of Africa; the Bab al-Mandab Strait at the southern tip of the Red Sea; the Strait of Hormuz at the southern tip of the Persian Gulf; the Strait of Malacca between Indonesia and Malaysia; and the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra. Every one of these elements has an importance. The first site might be in charge of shipping lanes in Africa, the second might guard the southern Suez Canal, and the third might control oil spills. The fourth and the fifth facilitate transportation between the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Approximately 32.2 million barrels of oil and gas are moved daily through the strategically important narrow waterways, especially the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. In other words, the Indian Ocean is the main route for almost 50% of global oil traffic (Fabtian, 2019).

There are three important reasons why the Indian Ocean is important. First, it benefits from its strategic location at the crossroads of international trade routes, facilitating connections between the major economic powers of the North Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions. This is crucial in a time when international shipping is developing at an unprecedented pace. The current global commercial fleet, consisting of around 90,000 ships, carries a total of 9.84 billion tons annually. The volume of commercial shipping has increased almost fourfold since 1970 (Hoffmann, 2015). The Indian Ocean serves many purposes beyond being a mere commercial channel. The vast river basin of the ocean is particularly important because it is home to around two billion individuals. This provides opportunities, particularly in light of the Indian Ocean region's explosive economic growth, which encompasses Bangladesh, India, Southeast Asia, and East and South Africa (Pandya et al., 2011).

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Natural resources are abundant in the Indian Ocean. Of the global offshore oil output, 40% comes from the Indian Ocean Basin. The proportion of global fishing that occurs in the Indian Ocean has increased to about 15%, representing a thirteen-fold increase from 1950 to 2010, resulting in a total catch of 11.5 million tons. The region's aquaculture industry has increased twelve-fold since 1980. Although global fishing has reached its maximum sustainable yield, the Indian Ocean has the potential to support even higher levels of productivity. The Indian Ocean serves as an important conduit for global maritime transport, connecting several countries including Somalia, Yemen, Oman, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Shipping in the Indian Ocean is divided into three categories: dhows, dry cargo ships, and barges. The Indian Ocean contains four of the six major ocean basins, which serve as vital sea lanes for the energy resources needed to power the world's largest economies (Tertia & Perwita, 2018). The seabed contains a large number of mineral resources, including rich nodules of nickel, cobalt, iron, and abundant concentrations of sulfides of copper, iron, manganese, silver, gold, and zinc. The coastal sediments of the Indian Ocean represent significant reservoirs of copper, lead, titanium, zirconium, and zinc. In addition, there are many rare earth elements, but their extraction is not always economically feasible (Michel & Sticklor, 2012).

In addition, India attaches great importance to the Indian Ocean due to its status as the country with the highest population density along its coastline. Undoubtedly, India's leadership role will play a vital role in shaping its strategic objectives, not only for its neighboring coastal states but also for countries outside the region. India is located in the middle of the Ocean and has a coastline of over 7,500 kilometers. In his 2015 speech in Mauritius, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that "India is strategically located at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean, and our highest policy priority is the Indian Ocean region." Additionally, nearly 80% of

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India's crude oil demands are met by the 3.28 million barrels it imports daily via seaborne transit across the Indian Ocean. When taking into account petroleum exports and offshore oil production, the Indian Navy estimates that 93% of India is dependent on oil. More over 45% of India's liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports are sent by sea, making it the fourth-largest LNG importer (Indian Navy, 2015). In fact, according to Manuel Joao Ramos et al. (2017), the participation of East African society in various commercial, cultural, and religious environments also has military power, administrative power, and economic power in the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, India is largely reliant on the Indian Ocean's resources. India, which ranked sixth in the world with 4.1 million tons of fish harvested in 2008, employs around 14 million people in the fisheries and aquaculture sector (FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Department, 2012). The fisheries and aquaculture industries are important export sources for India. India's maritime exports grew 55 times between 1962 and 2012, and its current fisheries exports are Rs. 16,600 crore, or about \$2.5 billion. Mineral resource extraction is also essential. In 1987, India was given the exclusive right to explore the Central Indian Ocean. It has since surveyed four million square miles and created two mining locations. In 2013, the Geological Survey of India acquired the deep-sea exploration vessel *Samudra Ratnakar* from South Korea to enhance its surveying capabilities. The Indian Ocean Ridge was granted a license by the International Seabed Authority in 2014, creating fresh prospects for deep-sea mining. Large quantities of cobalt, copper, manganese, and nickel, all of which are uncommon in India, are thought to exist in the area (Jaishankar, 2016).

### **Rivalry Factors between China and India in the Indian Ocean**

Since China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region, several major countries including the US and India appear concerned. The rivalry between China and India, the

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world's two most populous countries, seems to be intensifying. According to the realist perspective, the conflict between India and China in the Indian Ocean can be seen as a significant struggle for power and influence. Both countries have great strategic interests in maritime trade routes, energy resources, and the geopolitical position of the region. As described in Khurana's research (2008), China's presence in the Indian Ocean is part of a broader strategy to expand its influence in this maritime region. This is in line with the realist theory, which emphasizes that countries seek to control strategic areas to protect and strengthen their position of power. One tangible example of this struggle for power is China's attempts to increase its influence in the region through the BRI and the development of port infrastructure. This is exacerbated by the emergence of China's economic power which is considered significant and is also based on its massive military development in the region. This illustrates the increasing strength of China's assertiveness and influence in the region. Even a term has emerged that attempts to construct the Indo-Pacific region based on China's perspective, namely the "String of Pearl". This is what causes other countries, especially India, to assume that China is trying to dominate and become a hegemonic power in the region.

Amid the recent focus on the border dispute and other diplomatic conflicts between India and China, it is crucial to keep in mind that the rivalry between the two also extends beyond the Indian Ocean. Congress must assess the impact of the growing strategic rivalry on American interests and the balance of power in Asia. India and China are becoming more competitive in the Indian Ocean, the third-largest body of water in the world. By constructing deep-sea ports in coastal states and deploying military patrols, regional powers are progressively demonstrating their control over the waters. The stability of a region that is essential to international trade may be threatened by the increased level of activity, including port construction and military drills, as well as the use of harsh language, even though

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military analysts say the likelihood of a military conflict between India and China is currently very low. Nevertheless, the diverse non-conventional security issues in the Indian Ocean region present opportunities for cooperation with China, India, and other regional stakeholders.

China has emerged as the world's most important trading nation throughout the past forty years. Its overall imports and exports in 2021 totaled an astounding \$6 trillion, according to the World Trade Organization. China's economy has the potential to surpass all others in the globe in the future. China's rise since the Cold War has had a major impact on global growth, especially in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and has changed the global power dynamics. Professor Robert D. Kaplan of the US Naval Academy claims that China is actively shifting the Eastern Hemisphere's balance of power. From Central Asia to the Russian Far East, and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, both land and marine areas are impacted (Kaplan, 2012).

China's military developments are critical to safeguarding its economic interests. China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects, including ports, roads, and railways, in countries around the Indian Ocean, as part of China's BRI. The aim is to improve connectivity and boost economic growth in the region, thereby facilitating Chinese exports through the Indian Ocean. As such, China has recently sought to increase its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and build what observers have called a "string of pearls", a network of commercial facilities along the Indian Ocean coast. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, China built a military port at Gwadar, located on Pakistan's Arabian coast. This development not only made Gwadar a crucial location for the shipping of crude oil, but it also gave the Chinese Navy a reason to be present in the Indian Ocean so it could monitor naval activity. Additionally, India has long desired the port of Chittagong to carry natural gas and oil from Myanmar to northeastern India, and Bangladesh has granted the Chinese Navy access to it.

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China's trade, particularly in oil, depends on the Indian Ocean being secure and stable. Nine of China's 10 biggest suppliers of crude oil use the Indian Ocean as a transit route. China uses the Indian Ocean as a key location to build ties with the Middle East, Africa, island nations, and coastal areas that stretch across the enormous ocean. Furthermore, the region acts as a significant commercial entry point between Europe and China. Consequently, it is clear that China has an economic affinity with the Indian Ocean.

China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean has raised concerns among certain countries, especially India, which sees China's actions as a strategic threat to its power in the region (Ashraf, 2023). The economies of China and India depend on safe shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. Currently, the Middle East provides India with 80% of its energy, mostly oil. China is predicted to surpass Japan as the third-largest energy consumer in the world. 84% of China's energy imports are transported through the Strait of Malacca, which rises in the Indian Ocean, according to a 2012 US Department of Defense report. It is anticipated that Beijing and New Delhi would require more secure resource transmission as both seek to sustain economic growth. The strategic relevance of the sea is growing as China's influence expands globally and India's economic expansion accelerates (Choudhary, 2023).

The above then becomes the reason why India needs to be a strategic counterweight to China. On the other hand, India also attracts quite a lot of attention because it considers the Indo-Pacific region to be India's "backyard", thus giving rise to the perception that India has the right to this region. Furthermore, with massive military development in the region, India considers that there is a potential for conflict that will threaten the security of the Indian region, so currently, India is trying to establish military alliance cooperation, especially with the US, to balance China's military power.



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Both countries have formulated strategies to improve infrastructure and build stronger ties in the region, which the World Bank has identified as one of the “least economically integrated” regions. Despite occasional undercurrents of tension, both Beijing and New Delhi have actively forged alliances with neighboring countries to safeguard their security and economic interests. China’s diplomatic ties with its neighbors are growing stronger, as evidenced by China’s increasing investment in infrastructure development in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. China has a long history of diplomatic and political relations with numerous Indian Ocean coastal nations. It is the only country to have embassies in six islands in the Indian Ocean, including Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, the Seychelles, and the Comoros. China is strengthening its relations with Myanmar and considering enhancing oil and gas ties with the country through the establishment of a Special Economic Zone in Kyaukpyu located in the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal, especially the Six Degree Channel close to the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, is a major contributor to the growth of China’s bilateral international trade and commerce. The Six Indian Channel and the Ten Indian Channel separate the Nicobar Islands from the Andaman Islands to the north. These islands have significant commercial and military importance to both New Delhi and Beijing.

Unlike the US, the UK, and France, China has no territorial or sovereignty disputes in the Indian Ocean. These disputes arose as a result of the decolonization process. Beijing is frequently regarded as an alternative and lucrative player in the area. China has expanded its diplomatic and political influence in the Indian Ocean region by forging solid military and commercial ties with nations from the Indian Ocean littoral region to the east coast of Africa. Beijing’s desire to take on a new role as a reliable and growing security and economic ally in the Indian Ocean can be interpreted as a significant development (Baruah, 2023).

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In order to protect foreign interests, such as the safety of people, property, and investments, China has also worked to modernize its military, with a special emphasis on improving its naval deployment capabilities. Furthermore, experts believe that China's surplus manufacturing capacity is the driving force behind Beijing's attempts to set foot on what is sometimes referred to as India's territory, which is forcing Chinese companies to withdraw from local markets to compete and build new markets abroad. China has done so, maintaining continuous and unwavering engagement with countries located around the Indian Ocean, including coastal and island states (Moriyasu & Sharma, 2022).

On the other hand, India views itself as a dominant regional power. In this regard, India also uses a realist strategy in dealing with the rise of China. According to Doyle (2018), India also understands that control of the Indian Ocean is very important for its national interests, both in terms of security and economy. Competition to control maritime trade routes and ensure energy security in this region is a central issue in India's foreign policy, especially in maintaining its sovereignty amidst China's increasing power. David Brewster (2015) highlights that the tensions between India and China in the Indian Ocean reflect mistrust and strategic competition, where each country seeks to strengthen its economic and military position in the region. The realist perspective explains that in the struggle for power, each country will always try to increase its military and economic capacity, even if this triggers conflict or tension.

In order to strengthen India's position as a regional development catalyst, boost its economy, and lessen the appeal of China's expanding influence, Modi is actively working to improve diplomatic, economic, and security ties with maritime governments in the Indian Ocean region. China's increasing sway over the Indian Ocean is a major worry for India. India occupies a crucial role in the area and is very powerful militarily and economically. India's east and west coasts and islands are

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home to 200 small ports and 12 large ports. These figures highlight how crucial the Indian Ocean is to India's maritime ambitions and capabilities. In the contemporary era, the Indian Ocean has grown to be a major draw for major powers like the US and China. India is trying to strike a balance between these various stances while safeguarding its national interests. There is no denying that India's role is becoming increasingly important as the country increasingly relies on maritime routes for the transportation of large quantities of products, from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal to the Indian Ocean. India's foreign policy revolves around the Indian Ocean. After China's announcement, India's response was predictable that India should act as a legislator, not a slave.

China insists that its actions are driven by business motives and aimed at protecting its interests, as well as those of its citizens abroad. However, Brahma Chellaney of the independent Indian think tank Centre for Policy Research contends that Xi Jinping's goal of establishing naval supremacy in order to achieve Chinese hegemony in Asia is consistent with China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Both sides continue to want to improve their military capabilities in the maritime sector, although continuous negotiations regarding China's goals. In addition to purchasing and selling cutting-edge weapons to its neighbor, India, including tanks, frigates, missiles, and radars, China is also stepping up its naval presence in the western Indian Ocean to support anti-piracy initiatives.

China remains a significant danger and is India's principal rival in the Indian Ocean. China is seen by India as a nation that could endanger Indian security. China is also making a concerted effort to challenge India's hegemony in the Indian Ocean. In order to offset India's dominance in the waters, China is currently pursuing an expansionist policy that involves forging partnerships with coastal governments and extending its influence in the Indian Ocean. India is also worried that China may

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exploit the maritime infrastructure it funds in the Indian Ocean as part of its BRI for military and geopolitical purposes (Khan, 2023).

India is increasing its regional maritime influence. The primary goal is to increase security by strengthening India's capabilities in the Indian Ocean and forming alliances. The nation has made large financial commitments to improve its naval capabilities, particularly in the field of anti-submarine warfare. China also deployed naval vessels to the South China Sea and promoted the ideas of free navigation and the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes as part of its Act East policy. New Delhi is working to become a regional leader by modernizing its fleet, military bases, and equipment, acquiring new marine assets, and strengthening security connections. The first bilateral drills were started by Modi. Along with the US, Australia, and Japan, India participates in multilateral naval drills in the Bay of Bengal (Albert, 2016).

India has acknowledged China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean and has implemented measures to balance its military position. India has successfully forged agreements with other littoral governments in the Indian Ocean region to secure military access to their naval bases. The accords strengthen India's geopolitical position as a counter to Beijing's "string of pearls" policy by giving New Delhi access to Oman's port of Duqm and Indonesia's strategically placed deep-sea port of Sabang. By expanding cooperation with France and the US through logistics agreements, India has improved its relations with nations outside the Indian Ocean. India has the right to use port facilities at the French station on Reunion Island and the US base at Diego Garcia as a result to these diplomatic agreements. Since then, the US has developed diplomatic relations with India through the Quad, which also consists of Japan and Australia. Similarly, pointing to India's increasing sway over geopolitical matters in the Indian Ocean, France has called for the creation of a "Paris-New Delhi-Canberra" alliance in the Indo-Pacific region (Thakker, 2018).

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Experts argue that the rivalry between China and India could stimulate the advancement and utilization of naval resources on both sides, as well as in the surrounding region. The geographic expansion of China-India competition could improve strategic ties between the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions, which could lead to the creation of a larger and more linked Indo-Pacific region. More rivalry for energy and other resources in the Indian Ocean will result from this as well. The way China and India interact in this region has further ramifications for US interests and policies. Goods and energy resources are transported from the Middle East to growing East Asian nations via the Indian Ocean. The growing naval acquisition initiatives by China, India, and its neighbors are partly a result of this strategic interest. Chinese naval operations in the Indian Ocean have also intensified as a result of this. Many Asian nations are concerned about the increasing influence of China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, particularly in light of its forceful moves in the East and South China Seas. China's attempts to eradicate piracy in the Arabian Sea marked the beginning of its nautical involvement in the Indian Ocean. Some Indians are becoming increasingly vulnerable as China strategically increases its influence in the area. However, China may also feel threatened by India's lack of capacity to guard vital sea lanes that are vital to China's commercial and energy needs (Pattanaik, 2024).

### **The Effect of China-India Rivalry towards Other Countries**

Indonesia is home to the world's largest island. Indonesia holds a significant position in the maritime sector due to its location at the meeting point of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which opens up opportunities for cooperation with nearby nations. Because it is home to the Sea Lanes of Communication, a trans-Pacific communication route abundant in energy resources, Indonesia holds a significant position in the Indo-Pacific. Despite its disagreements with China, the US has

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positive relations with India. Being a Southeast Asian maritime nation, Indonesia is unavoidably impacted by the struggle between the three major powers. India and China unquestionably have important interests and roles in South Asia (Egberink & van der Putten, 2010).

Indonesia, as the leader of the Commonwealth of Indian Ocean Nations, is aware that it is trying hard to free the global oil trade from the influence of big countries and potential threats to regional security and stability. Two big countries have jurisdiction over the Indian Ocean. They use economic, military, and political power as dominant forces. Amid the increasing tensions between the two countries, Indonesia remains silent and is negotiating with the IORA. Some groups accuse the rivalry between India and China, said one of the IORA chairmen, has paralyzed the organization and failed to reach an agreement on security despite similar concerns in the Indian Ocean two decades ago.

The IORA countries declined to comment citing security reasons. It can be assumed that the rivalry between India and China contributed to this infertility. This problem is further complicated by the fact that not all of the countries on India's coast have joined the IORA, and many of them are close allies of China, like Pakistan, and a direct enemy of India (Muhammad, 2016). Indonesia, as a middle country, considers the selection of a fence strategy very important to overcome security uncertainty and mitigate the adverse impacts of the increasing competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean. Since the administration of President Joko Widodo, there has been a focus on building strong collaboration in key sectors such as the economy, infrastructure development, security, and defense (Munabari et al., 2021).

The major powers will compete fiercely in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, unlike during the Cold War. This region is currently the center of China and India's growing great power rivalry. The US-China rivalry is expected to shape the

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future, including countries bordering South Asia. The conflict between India and China, as well as between the US and China, is expected to have the most significant impact in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region due to Beijing's increasing presence and influence in these regions, offering both challenges and opportunities. The China-India rivalry will play a significant role in shaping the distribution of power in the region. However, it may also impact the degree to which nations decide to cooperate or compete with one another, as well as their willingness to cooperate with other leading countries, both regionally and globally. This includes participation in international organizations or alliances based on shared interests.

This dynamic will also involve other significant nations that have economic or geopolitical interests in this region or that are worried about China's expanding power and actions. Japan, Russia, France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU) are among the nations named. The main powers will try to manage their rivalry and safeguard their interests at the same time. The region's smaller nations will try to defend themselves from any unfavorable outcomes while claiming their rights and taking advantage of the competition between India and China. Together, these two factors will shape the region's geopolitical environment. The outcome of this rivalry will have far-reaching consequences not only for South Asia and the Indian Ocean but also for regional peace and security in the Indo-Pacific and the global distribution of power (Madan, 2021).

As part of this strategic sea, Sri Lanka is an island and maritime country that attracts the attention of world's major powers because of its strategic location in the region. Despite its tiny size, Sri Lanka is one of the most productive nations in the Indian Ocean. It is clear that the two Asian giants dominate Sri Lanka in distinct ways because of its closeness to important sea lanes and regional powers. The preservation of Sri Lanka's strategic location, coastline, and shipping are only a few of its many other benefits. In the meanwhile, Sri Lanka will play a significant role in

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maintaining regional maritime security. One of Sri Lanka's most crucial strategic advantages in the region is its closeness to regional powerhouses, which makes its geographic location crucial to preserving India's security. International maritime traffic can be significantly impacted by even a tiny ship wreck passing through Sri Lanka's southern point (Chaminda K., 2022).

The objectives of Sri Lanka's foreign policy and national interests will shift in tandem with societal governance changes. The fact that a tiny nation like Sri Lanka is up against two strong nations, China and India, is what matters here. However, in the post-conflict scenario, Sri Lanka's political climate will be able to establish internal stability without permitting the rise of divisive ideologies and actions to lead the nation into an economic crisis. Comparing Sri Lanka's place in the global and regional stages, where it is affected by the rivalry for regional dominance between China and India, reveals the benefits of trade between India, China, and the US, and the adoption of non-discrimination policies contribute to Sri Lanka's economic prosperity.

One of the areas located in the Indian Ocean is the Maldives, a small island nation that has grown to be a crucial arena in the South Asian rivalry between India and China. It is one of the few South Asian countries with close ties to both Beijing and New Delhi. By taking advantage of the Maldives' pro-Indian government and engaging in vaccine diplomacy, an area in which India has a competitive edge over Beijing, India hopes to further its relationship with the Maldives. For over forty years following its independence, the nation was still influenced by India. Following the Maldives' independence in 1965, India was among the first nations to open diplomatic relations with the island nation (Kugelman, 2021).

In 2013, India's influence over the Maldives drastically decreased. Elections brought Abdulla Yameen to power following a period of political unrest. Beijing swiftly backed Yameen, a leader with autocratic tendencies. In addition to



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constructing the BRI, China is also developing a number of new infrastructure projects in the Maldives. The China-Maldives trade pact was quickly followed by the Maldives' independence, and soon after, the Maldives was officially inaugurated as a member of the BRI. In 2018, Beijing successfully carried out major renovations, including the construction of a 3,400-meter runway at the Maldives' main international airport. In addition, they built a bridge connecting the islands of Malé and Hulhumalé. The Maldives suffered losses from these investments. By 2018, Chinese loans had burdened Malé with debts totaling more than \$1.5 billion. This is quite a large amount considering the country's gross domestic product is less than \$9 billion. Debt to China does more than just put financial pressure on a country's economy. This also raises the possibility of making the country vulnerable to "debt trap diplomacy", a situation in which Beijing exploits debt to manipulate borrowing countries into fulfilling China's goals (Muratbekova, 2020).

India's good diplomatic relations with the current Maldivian government may give India a strategic advantage over China in the Maldives. However, the Maldives is similar to other small South Asian countries: it is strategically located between China and India, which are competing to expand their influence and strengthen their presence. Given its favorable geographical position and the significant progress made by both India and China, the Maldives will remain an important focal point for investment and influence-building for both countries.

Increasing India's influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean is also in line with Europe's interest in promoting free trade and ensuring the resilience of supply chains. It also backs the objective of maintaining a multipolar international order in which nations' political choices are unrestricted by their economic reliance on China. The Indo-Pacific region is responsible for 27% of all exports and 40% of imports from outside the EU, with the majority of these being shipped by sea. Consequently, Europe's primary gateway to the Indo-Pacific region is the Indian Ocean. India and

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China are progressively entering a new stage of antagonistic rivalry. Even if a direct confrontation is improbable, Europe and India are both concerned about the increasing rift in India-China ties in the Indian Ocean.

The EU has named India a priority partner in its Indo-Pacific strategy for 2021. However, the EU's relationship with New Delhi is widely seen as not reaching its full potential despite its historic significance. The necessity for this has been brought to light in recent years by growing European disenchantment with China, which has also opened the door for better ties with India. The establishment and implementation of the EU's Indo-Pacific cooperation strategy, the free trade agreement between the EU and India, the Trade and Technology Council, and the Connectivity Partnership should all receive top priority from the EU. These initiatives will demonstrate the EU's dedication and effectively facilitate more than just symbolic cooperation with India (Grare & Reuter, 2023). The EU nations are the biggest foreign investors, giving €50 billion, as well as make up 13.5% of India's trade. Five EU countries (the Netherlands, Germany, France, the UK, and Cyprus) are among the top ten investors in India. Six million people are employed directly or indirectly by 6,000 enterprises in the EU, according to the EU Delegation to India (2018). India is also one of the EU's top ten trading partners. The Maritime Lines of Communication in the Indian Ocean support 90% of trade between the EU and India. Being the largest littoral state in the Indian Ocean and a key security facilitator, India has essential duties (Łukaszuk, 2020).

Furthermore, the impact of this rivalry has an indirect effect on the US. Washington should seek to enhance its alliance with New Delhi in a way that both instills confidence in India and discourages China. Although New Delhi's strong adherence to non-alignment poses certain constraints, there is potential to enhance strategic collaboration between the US and India in a way that advances the national security interests of both democracies and strengthens the stability of democratic

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states in the region. Building closer ties with India has been a key component of the Biden administration's strategy for competing with China in the Indo-Pacific. However, New Delhi's acceptance of Washington's proposal for a strategic alliance was spurred by India's perceived vulnerability to Chinese aggression. Though their viewpoints are influenced by disparate national interests and ideologies, both India and the US see China as a strategic challenge. Indian officials are aware of the dangers associated with the border dispute with China and continue to be concerned about the lack of security, which has forced India to become increasingly dependent on Washington (Markey & Scobell, 2023).

Japan has long maintained its interests in the Indian Ocean because of its strategic control over key maritime routes that enable the transportation of oil resources from the Middle East. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Japan was one of the first to emphasize the value of cooperative security management in the Indian Ocean. Japan is viewed by India as an important resource for its development. The Japan International Cooperation Agency has provided the government with Official Development Assistance over the years to construct a variety of infrastructure projects, including subways, railways, highways, bridges, and other facilities. Japan has also prioritized security collaboration in the Indian Ocean, a move welcomed by India. Although both governments share responsibility for upholding maritime peace, India has consistently expressed concerns about Chinese naval activity near its shores. In the last few years, Japan has agreed to take part in the US-India joint naval exercise known as Operation Malabar, which takes place in the Indian Ocean. India wants to invest more money in purchasing cutting-edge naval equipment. Japan and India have finalized a deal to sell ShinMaywa US-2 aircraft. The amphibious aircraft is an advanced aircraft specifically developed for air-sea rescue operations and is used by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (Mai, 2018).

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## CONCLUSION

The Indian Ocean is a very important trade route globally, as well as an area rich in natural resources and of strategic value to major countries, especially India and China. For India, the Indian Ocean is a key to its commercial and energy interests, with about 80% of its energy imports passing through the region. On the other hand, China also views the region as very important, especially for securing trade routes and meeting its energy needs. As part of the BRI strategy, China has strengthened its influence in the region by building critical infrastructure in coastal countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar. This effort allows China to secure vital trade routes and expand its geopolitical reach.

Given that the Indian Ocean has traditionally been India's sphere of influence, India responded by believing that China's presence in this region threatened its security and interests. In response, India strengthened its military and forged strategic alliances through the Quad with nations like the US, Australia, and Japan.

An important finding of this study is that this rivalry has not only impacted India-China bilateral relations but also shifted the geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean more broadly. Countries such as Indonesia, with its strategic position on major trade routes, are also affected by this shift in the balance of power. Indonesia must be careful in managing its relations with both countries to protect its national interests, including maritime security.

In addition, this study shows that European nations have also taken notice of the tensions in the Indian Ocean. Both regional stability and the global political order are impacted by this competition. All things considered, the Indian Ocean is currently a significant geopolitical battleground, with ramifications that extend well beyond the two nations and could influence the framework of international security. India's efforts to become a counterweight to China are driven by concerns about China's assertiveness that threatens regional security, and signals China's massive

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rise strategy, and are also driven by other major countries that do not want China to become dominant in the region.

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