Physical Education, Health and Social Sciences

https://journal-of-social-ducation.org

E-ISSN: 2958-5996

P-ISSN: 2958-5988

Balancing Threats in the Indian Ocean: India-China Rivalry through a Neorealist Lens

Eman Hassan [1], Dr. Muhammad Hatim [2], Dr. Adeel Irfan [3], Aamna Ali [4]

[1] Scholar, Department of politics and international relations, University of Sargodha Emanhassan8859@gmail.com
[2] Assistant Professor Department of Politics and International Relations University of Sargodha Muhammad.hatim@uos.edu.pk
[3] Assistant Professor Department of politics and international relations University of Sargodha adeel.irfan@uos.edu.pk
[4] Scholar, Department of politics and international relations, University of Sargodha Aamnastic19@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i2.406

Abstract

Purpose- This paper examines how this rivalry is playing out, focusing on both countries' efforts to expand their maritime presence, secure trade routes, and strengthen ties with littoral states. By applying neo-realism and balance of threat theory, the study explores the motivations behind their actions and the broader implications for regional stability.

Findings- The paper reveals that China's growing involvement through port investments and its Belt and Road Initiative has raised concerns in India about encirclement and loss of regional influence which caused India to boost naval capabilities and sought closer ties with partners such as the United States, Japan, and France. At the same time, smaller Indian Ocean countries are not passive observers; many are pursuing flexible strategies that allow them to engage with both powers while protecting their own interests.

Methodology-The analysis is competitive and interpretive, focusing on how India and China framed their strategic narratives and economic initiatives within the IOR. Rather than framing this rivalry as a straightforward contest, the paper emphasizes its complexity—where economic cooperation coexists with deep strategic mistrust.

Keywords, maritime zone, strategic depth, military confrontation, Neorealism, economic competition, Balance of threat.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean has become the world's most consequential maritime spaces, simultaneously serving as a hotspot for global commerce and is a reservoir of critical natural resources and a boiling pot for global power (Wulandari, 2024). It extends to Asia, Africa and Australia, covering almost 70.56 million sq (Central Intelligence Agency, 2025). World 80% global trade is done through the region, making it essential for both economic and political prespectives(Ghalib, 2024). Baruah & Duckworth (2022) asserted that Indian Ocean Region encompasses the vital strategic choke points such as Strait of Hormuz, Malacca and Bab-el- Mandeb. If any disruption occurs in its checkpoints, then the consequences could reverberate across international markets and regional

security architecture. The economic importance of the Indian-Ocean region is further elevated by rich fisheries, seabed minerals, oil and gas reserves promoting both regional and non-regional powers to engage in a tug of war situation in pursuit of dominance and power through infrastructure investment, naval deployments, and diplomatic engagement.

Asia's two giants both economically and geographically have become trapped in an intensifying struggle for maritime influence. India's almost 80 percent of crude oil and 95 percent of trade depend on the checkpoints in this region views it as India's strategic backyard being itself located at the heart of the Indian ocean(Dutta & Dutta, 2024). China, whose economic lifelines run through the same sea lanes, has responded by extending its "String of Pearls" network of ports and by weaving Indian Ocean littoral states into its Belt and Road Initiative to secure both commercial access and potential military establishments(Klasra et al., 2024). India has solidified its maritime partnerships with United states, Japan, Australia and other democracies through QUAD (Dutta & Dutta, 2024). Besides that, China and India are actively engaging in bilateral trade agreements which has made the situation more complex (Upadhyay, 2024).

From a neo-realist perspective, the anarchic nature of international system compels both states to maximize their relative power by controlling important checkpoints such as the strait of Malacca, fostering alliances and placement of naval forces in the deep waters. A significant amount of work has been done on China's string of pearls strategy and India's Iron curtain counter measure but a synthetic approach that integrates strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the Sino-Indian maritime competition is still needed (Singh & Bhatt, 2024). Indian Ocean rivalry is important as it will not only shape the security architecture in the region but the balance of power in international arena as well.

Literature Review:

The Indian Ocean region is one of the most significant sea trade routes stretching from the east coast of Africa to the western Pacific region in the contemporary world. About eighty percent of the world's oil is transported through this maritime zone and that is one of the reasons why China and India are trying to establish their hegemony over the region (Wulandari, 2024) .The presence of bottlenecks such as Hormuz, passage through Malacca, and the Bab-el-Mandeb passage have increased the economic and strategic importance of the IOR(Freitas, 2024).

In addition to the domestic problems such as the military expansion by states bordering this maritime passage, Illicit trade practices, and smuggling, the increasing military presence of Western nations such as the US has further heightened tensions in the India-China Rivalry in the IOR. China views the growing partnership of India and the US as an attempt to contain its economic and military growth(Freitas, 2024) Thus, it invested heavily in seaport facilities such as Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. BRI and a string of Pearls strategy will be fully active soon and will strengthen China's grip on the economic markets of the region and thus the influence it can exert. India is concerned about China's rise as it views China's policies as an attempt to contain India and be the next hegemon in the region by controlling a major portion of world maritime trade. India has responded through QUAD and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze the India-China rivalry, their counter strategies, role of external actors such as the US, Japan, and EU and to identify research gaps such as the implications of IOR conflict on domestic and global politics and trade and the fate of the regional allies involved.

Historical Context of China-India Rivalry in the IOR

Seeking to maintain its dominance in Indian Ocean Region, India has introduced an initiative of "Blue water" in the period of 1990s(Basu, 2021). This highlights India's sole objective to expand it's naval presence and to secure its interests to the oceans. Despite the fact that China is relatively a new dominant actor in the region, it still has influential long term diplomatic and political relations with island states of IOR. This is evident from the fact that China is the only country having an embassy in each of the littorals such that in Srilanka, Mauritius, Maldives, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles(Baruah et al., 2023). China's strategy of pearls in the early 21st century under which it secured important seaports in Pakistan, Srilanka and Djibouti challenged India's hegemony in the region (Nishantha et al., 2024**).** In Response, India pursued the policy of Security and Growth for All the Region (SAGAR) to contain China. Advancing this doctrine, India aspires to strengthen its economic cooperation with maritime allies and assist them in the development of naval defense capabilities(Bhattacharya, 2024). According to information received from the Council on Foreign Relations, the competitive power PRC has invested billions in establishing 46 commercial ports throughout the region, among which 36 host naval assets(Martin et al.**,** 2025). It sparks concern in India because China is dragging states into a debt trap where states will loose the powers to direct and decide state policies in favor of China. Therefore, the land-based conflict has now shifted to a maritime power struggle and IOR has become yet another flashpoint of war(Khan et al., 2023).

Competition in the Indian Ocean Region

In order to make it difficult for Chinese ships and submarines to access the IOR, the India is enhancing it's military capability in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, which are located at the edge of Strait of Malacca(Sharma, 2025). Ghalib in his study "India's Aggressive Maritime Ambitions: Analysing Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean Region"(2024) briefed that The two operational aircraft carriers of Indian Navy, are INS Vikramaditiya and the INS Vikrant,with powerful naval force. Furthermore, To generate their own military equipments, India is planning to construct 11 military bases near the IOR up until 2047. On the other hand, Reuters (2024) claimed that the Liaoning and Shandong are two active aircraft carries of People's Liberation army,while the third carrier named as Fujian is under marine trials. Both countries conduct joint naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and defense treaties with their allies. While China defends itself that Projects such as BRI aimed at building an extensive network of deep-sea ports to promote regional connectivity and economic prosperity, India views it as an attempt to undermine India's maritime influence.

Through CPEC china has established hold in Gwadar region. Similarly, Due to debt repayment issues with Srilanka that is India's largest trade partner china has obtained it's Hambantota port on lease for 99 years; the debt trap India speaks of China is improving relations with Maldives, traditionally an ally of India has lost some of its divisionary power due to Chinese investment there(Klasra et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Neo-realism is introduced by Kenneth Waltz, is concerned with the structure of the international system, which is anarchic. This anarchic nature of the international system is the primary driver of state behavior. It compels states to prioritize the accumulation of power for their survival. (Waltz, 1979). From a neo-realist perspective, the international system lacks a central authority, and survival is the top priority for states. This theory predicts that states will engage in behaviors including military interventions, territorial expansions, and alliances to pursue their power maximization goals. It contends that states prioritize state security and survival through balance of power (Ababakr, 2021).

The lack of a central authority leads to a security dilemma, where one state increases its security even with intentions of defense, other states feel threatened. China has focused on maritime expansion in the Indian Ocean, where it has built naval bases in Gwadar, Djibouti, pursuing its string of pearls strategy (Kao & Soong, 2024). It is pursuing strategic depth and influence beyond East Asia into South Asia and Africa to secure trade routes (especially the Malacca Strait) and energy supplies.

Similarly, India responded by expanding and modernizing its naval power, adding new ships and aircraft, such as INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant. It has enhanced its Andaman Nicobar command and joined alliances such as QUAD. India's active engagement with regional states such as Maldives and multilateral forums like the Indian ocean rim association is an attempt to balance power in the region (Pu, 2024). Neo-liberalism explains that despite fierce competition, the two states have avoided direct military confrontation in the IOR. Instead, their rivalry often manifests through economic competition, soft power projection, and diplomatic engagement with smaller island nations like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Mauritius. Balance of threat theory, given by Stephen Walt, proposes that states generally balance by allying against a perceived threat,not just against the power that country posses(Walt, 1987).But very weak states are more likely to align with the rising threat to ensure their survival. State threat perception depends on geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, Aggressive intentions, and aggregate power(Keohane, 1988). China's massive investments in South Asian ports (Sri Lanka's Hambantota, Pakistan's Gwadar) and its increasing naval presence closer to Indian shores have heightened India's threat perception (Wulandari, 2024). India's deeper military ties with powers like the U.S., Japan, Australia, (through QUAD & exercises like Malabar) are a balancing strategy against the Chinese threat, specifically in the maritime domain (Freitas, 2024).

Moreover, India's "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) initiative and the prioritization of maritime domain awareness projects reflect efforts to counter China's influence without direct confrontation (L. Khan & Ali, 2024). Recent analyses suggest that India's strategic responses are increasingly shaped not by China's raw power alone, but by the perceived aggressive intentions behind China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road.

There is significant data available on India-China rivalry at the continental level, but limited literature exists on how neo-realist strategies and threat perceptions shape the conflict in the Indian ocean region , including China's naval base in Djibouti and India's expanding QUAD cooperation. Most existing studies overlook the interaction between military strategies and economic infrastructure competition in shaping maritime security dynamics. The area that need to be explored is how small and economically weaker states struggle to survive in the political rift between China and India.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do neo-realist assumptions explain India and China's strategic behavior in the Indian Ocean Region?
2. How does the Balance of Threat Theory account for India's balancing actions against China's maritime expansion?

Methodology

The study conducted is qualitative in nature. Secondary data was collected from academic journals, articles, scholarly books, news, issue briefs and think tanks publications. Further, a theoretical approach was applied to demonstrate the role of smaller island developing states in the Sino Indian rivalry were scrutinized to explore the real-world application of Neo-realism and Balance of

Threat Theory. Data triangulation was adopted to enhance reliability by comparing multiple sources, ensuring a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of India-China competition.

Analysis

Neo-realism features that international system lacks a central authority and so there is an anarchic order operating in international arena(Waltz,1979).Grounded in the principles of power maximization as one can observe that aim to control sea-lines of communication and checkpoints in the Indian-ocean region, China and India are engaged in a relative power struggle. Strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the Sino Indian maritime competition. Both India and China depend heavily on Indian Ocean SLOCs—India for some 95 % of its trade and 80 % of its energy imports(Dutta & Dutta, 2024), China for roughly 90 percent of its oil shipments(Baruah et al., 2023). China has built port facilities in Gwadar and Hambantota eliciting rapid naval modernization, anti-submarine warfare enhancements in response as a measure to counter balance India's prevailing influence.

Balance of threat theory suggests that states do not take balancing measures against power but also against perceived threats which are assess based on aggregate capability, geographic proximity and offensive intentions(Walt, 1987). Chinas Belt and Road initiative infrastructure in littoral states is perceived by India as a threat that facilitates Peoples liberation army navy in having an easy access to India and thus could lead to their encirclement(Klasra et al., 2024). India is avoiding direct confrontation and thus opting for soft balancing measures which include deepening maritime partnerships with US and alliances such as QUAD(Tahir & Ejaz, 2020).

India has obtained access to the sea ports in Duqm (Indonesia), Chabahar (Iran), Sabang (Oman) and carried out multilateral military exercises in Milan and Malabar to respond against perceived threats from China under balance of threat theory(Nishantha et al., 2024). On the other hand, China has enhanced its blue-water capability through Anti-piracy policies and Djibouti base establishment which signals offensive intent and triggers India to take some counter balancing actions(Ruwitch,2023). Both powers have thus engaged in a security dilemma: defensive measures by one are interpreted as threats by the other, fueling a spiraling maritime arms competition.

A joint application of Neo-realism and balance of threat theory explains the economic interdependence that exists between China and India because none of them can afford to engage in an open war by closing sea lanes. Thus, they are augmenting naval power and fostering alliances to keep each other in security dilemma trap. This duality underscores a central paradox: the Indian Ocean remains a zone of both cooperation (anti piracy, trade) and intense great power competition. Based on the strategic theoretical foundations, behavior of small island states further illuminates balance of threat dynamics. Both states have adopted hedging instead of pure balancing measures or band wagoning effect as both engage in economic activities while retain security ties with external and regional external allies. Maldives have strengthened defense ties with India and US in the face of heavy investments from China in these countries to prevent over-dependence and influence by the latter(Basarkar, 2024). While Investments from China are readily welcomed by these states but they have been mindful of the future consequences and have preserved defense links with other states.

The hedging behavior adopted by China and India further complicates the situation as both seek alignments amid rivalry. China has adopted what is viewed by the world as a debt-trap where it lends investments for infrastructure development but the interest rates are not so feasible. These states are not able to pay these loans back and have to surrender some of their sovereignty to China in return. One can learn from the example of Hambantota port, which is a deep-water port located in Sri Lanka taken over by China for 99 years as the former was unable to pay back the loan(Jaleel et al., 2022).Thus, Chinese infrastructure lending is rightly perceived as threats by the Indians.

They have adopted several threat management strategies such as the deployment of P-81 aircraft and joint military exercises with France in the western Indian ocean(Pti, 2024). India lays emphasis on normative frameworks which advocate for free and open trade in the indian ocean region, following up international maritime laws and rule-based order (Mallick, 2024) Though, China justifies its string of pearls strategy and Belt & Road initiatives as peaceful plans aimed at regional connectivity and growth.

Looking ahead, the direction of India–China dynamics in the Indian Ocean will largely depend on how both powers continue to modernize their navies, build alliances, and respond to the strategic choices of smaller regional states. These smaller countries are not passive players—they often hedge their bets by engaging with both Beijing and New Delhi to maximize their own interests. Whether this region moves toward a stable, multipolar balance or slips into more intense rivalry will hinge on how these relationships evolve. Neo-realism warns us that periods of shifting power, like the current one, tend to be unstable and carry a high risk of confrontation. Meanwhile, balance of threat theory emphasizes that perception matters: how each country interprets the other's intentions can either ease tensions or inflame them. Transparency, trust-building efforts, and inclusive dialogue through regional platforms will be essential in managing competition and preventing it from spiraling into open conflict in this strategically vital part of the world.

Conclusion

The strategic contest between India and China in the Indian Ocean is more than a simple power rivalry; it reflects a deeper shift in regional dynamics and the broader recalibration of global influence. As both nations expand their maritime reach, the surrounding region is gradually being reshaped—not only in terms of security, but also through economic integration, diplomatic alignments, and technological competition. What stands out is the adaptability of smaller coastal states, which are using this great-power rivalry to their advantage, seeking development without becoming overly reliant on a single partner. India and China, for their part, continue to test the balance between asserting influence and avoiding open confrontation. Their choices in the coming years—whether rooted in cooperation, competition, or a mix of both—will have long-lasting implications beyond the Indian Ocean itself. While hard power will remain relevant, the ability to shape perceptions, build sustainable partnerships, and engage constructively with regional actors may prove even more decisive. This evolving situation offers no clear endgame, but what is certain is that the Indian Ocean will remain a central arena in the story of 21st-century power politics, where outcomes will be shaped as much by strategy as by diplomacy and restraint.

References

Wulandari, W. (2024). RIVALRY BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. BHUVANA: Journal of Global Studies, 2(2), 257–288. https://doi.org/10.59408/bjgs.v2i2.188

Freitas, M. J. (2024). China and India in the Indian Ocean: A Study of Strategic Importance and its Influence on Geopolitical Dynamics and Security Policies. Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 4(3), 152–174. https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2024.v04i03.014

Nishantha, H. a. A., Abeyrathne, G. D. R. U. U., & Sumanarathna, B. M. (2024). Struggle for the Legacy: Sino-India Rivalry over Energy Sources in the Indian Ocean. Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Review, 9(1), 43–59. https://doi.org/10.4038/jsshr.v9i1.128

Khan, S., Ahmad, Z., & Ullah, M. (2023). China's geostrategic interest in the Indian Ocean region. Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 4(4), 141–161. https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.917005034

Klasra, M. A., Hussain, S., & Din, S. S. (2024). Geopolitics of Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean: Sino-Indian rivalry and Implications on Pakistan. Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences and Management Practices, 3(1), 231–244. https://doi.org/10.61503/cissmp.v3i1.128

Kao, P., & Soong, J. (2024). China's Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan. Chinese Economy, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2024.2384170

Pu, X. (2024). Status signalling in the Indo-Pacific: strategic spinning, military posturing, and vaccine diplomacy. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations. https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241230862

Ghalib, S. J. (2024, September 2). Sardar Jahanzaib Ghalib. https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-indias-aggressive-maritime-ambitions-analysing-naval-expansion-in-the-indian-ocean-region/

Reuters. (2024, May 1). China launches sea trials for next-generation aircraft carrier. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-launches-sea-trials-next-generation-aircraft-carrier-2024-05-01/

Sharma, R. (2025, January 18). Chinese submarines in a 'Chokehold': India beefs up infra in Carnicobar to challenge China's forays in IOR. EURASIAN TIMES. https://www.eurasiantimes.com/india-beefing-up-infrastructure-in-carnicobar/?amp

Laraib Khan, & Syed Ehsan Ali. (2024). Balancing the Seas: India's Response to Geopolitical Shifts in the Indian Ocean Region. Pakistan Research Journal of Social Sciences, 3(3). Retrieved from https://prjss.com/index.php/prjss/article/view/187

Walt, S. (1987). The Origins of Alliances. Ithaca: Cornel University Press

30. Waltz, K. (1979). Theory of International Politics. Sydney: Addison-Wesley

Ababakr, N. A. (2021). Understanding neorealism theory in light of Kenneth Waltz's thoughts. International Relations and Diplomacy, 9(12). https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2021.12.002

Martin, P., Bhuckory, K., Sen, S. R., Leung, A., & Pogkas, D. (2025, March 11). Xi's China, Modi's India, US Battle for Dominance in Indian Ocean. Bloomberg.com. https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2025-indian-ocean-china-india/

Central Intelligence Agency. (2025). Indian Ocean. The World Factbook. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/oceans/indian-ocean/

Baruah, D. M., Labh, N., & Greely, J. (2023, June 15). Mapping the Indian Ocean Region. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en

Baruah, D. M., & Duckworth, C. (2022, May 2). We're thinking about the Indian Ocean all wrong. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/05/were-thinking-about-the-indian-ocean-all-wrong?lang=en

Mallick, P. (2024). India's maritime security dilemma and geopolitical competition in Indo-Pacific. Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2024.2381905

Ruwitch, J. (2023, September 1). China's navy is expanding its reach with overseas military bases. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/01/asia/china-navy-overseas-military-bases-intl-hnk-ml

Jaleel, S., Noor, H., & Ahmed, B. (2022). LEASE AGREEMENT ISSUE OF THE HAMBANTOTA AND GWADAR PORT: a COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS. Journal of Pakistan-China Studies (JPCS), 4(1), 51–64. https://doi.org/10.55733/jpcs.v4i1.59

Tahir, A., & Ejaz, K. (2020). India–United States strategic partnership in Indian Ocean region and its implications for Pakistan. Journal of Indian Studies, 6(1), 7–24. https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/indianStudies/PDF/1_v6_1_20.pdf

Basarkar, R. (2024, May 2). The Maldives is moving toward China. Here's what to know. Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/maldives-moving-toward-china-heres-what-know

Keohane, R.O. (1988). Alliances, Threats, and the Uses of Neorealism. International Security 13(1), 169-176. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/446770.

Singh, A., & Bhatt, P. (2024). India-China naval dynamics in the Indian Ocean. In Rising to the China challenge: Sino-Indian ties under Modi (pp. 6, 52). New Delhi: ORF and Global Policy Journal.

Basu, P. (2021,November 29). Maritime India: the quest for a steadfast identity. Orfonline.org. https://www.orfonline.org/research/maritime-india-the-quest-for-a-steadfast-identity

Pti. (2024, September 2). Indian Navy's P8I on its first-ever deployment in Europe, to take part in "Exercise Varuna." The Economic Times. https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/indian-navys-p8i-aircraft-in-france-for-exercise-varuna/articleshow/112984490.cms

Dutta, S., & Dutta, S. (2024, April 24). India's Competition with China for Dominance of the Indian Ocean. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/balancing-tides-indias-competition-china-dominance-indian

Bhattacharya, S. (2024). India is embracing a 'net security provider' role in the Indian Ocean Region. The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/india-is-embracing-a-net-security-provider-role-in-the-indian-ocean-region/

Upadhyay, S. (2024, May 16). India and China: Trading with the enemy. The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/india-and-china-trading-with-the-enemy/