
POLITICS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN AFTER WORLD WAR II TO THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean region has historically been a vital arena of global strategic, economic, and political competition. Since the end of World War II, the region has undergone significant transformation due to decolonization, Cold War rivalry, and the rise of globalization. Rich in natural resources and traversed by critical sea-lanes of communication, the Indian Ocean has attracted major powers seeking strategic dominance and economic advantage. The presence of competing military powers, fragile littoral states, and transnational challenges such as piracy and terrorism have further complicated the regional dynamics. This paper examines the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean from the post-World War II period to the contemporary era of globalization, with particular focus on the role of external powers, littoral state politics, maritime security, and India's strategic position.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Geopolitics, Maritime Security, Cold War, Globalization, Sea Lanes, Littoral States

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean has emerged as a central arena of global politics due to its strategic location, economic significance, and maritime connectivity. The end of the Second World War marked a decisive turning point in the region's political and strategic history. The dismantling of European colonial empires led to the emergence of newly independent states, each striving to assert sovereignty and economic independence.

At the same time, the bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union brought the Indian Ocean into the strategic calculations of global superpowers. The presence of vital sea lanes, energy routes, and choke points made the region indispensable for global trade and security. The evolution of international maritime law further encouraged littoral states to assert control over their maritime zones, leading to new forms of competition and cooperation.

Thus, the Indian Ocean region today represents a complex geopolitical space shaped by historical legacies, strategic rivalries, and emerging global economic forces.

Historical Evolution of Power Politics in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has long been a theatre of imperial and commercial competition. Since the arrival of European maritime powers in the late fifteenth century, control over sea routes and coastal territories became a major objective of colonial expansion. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British established naval bases and trading posts to dominate commerce between Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Following World War II, decolonization led to the withdrawal of these imperial powers from Asia and Africa. However, their strategic and economic interests in the region did not disappear. Britain, for example, retained military facilities and economic influence "East of Suez," particularly due to its dependence on Middle Eastern oil and Asian trade routes. France also continued its presence through overseas territories and military deployments.

The post-colonial period therefore did not eliminate external influence but transformed it into a new form of geopolitical engagement dominated by superpower rivalry.

Cold War Geopolitics and Superpower Rivalry

During the Cold War, the Indian Ocean became an important theatre of strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both powers sought to secure naval bases, access routes, and political alliances in order to expand their influence.

Events such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan significantly altered the regional balance of power. The United States viewed these developments as threats to the stability of the Gulf region and the security of oil supplies. As a result, it strengthened its naval presence and strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, expanded its naval capabilities and strategic partnerships in the region. The presence of both superpowers led to the militarization of the Indian Ocean and heightened geopolitical tensions. Unlike the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, however, no single power was able to dominate the entire Indian Ocean region, making it a uniquely multipolar maritime space.

Littoral State Politics and Non-Alignment

The newly independent states of the Indian Ocean region adopted non-alignment as a guiding principle of foreign policy. The aim was to preserve sovereignty and avoid entanglement in Cold War conflicts. However, the realities of security threats, economic dependence, and political instability made strict adherence to non-alignment difficult.

Many littoral states entered into security arrangements with major powers due to strategic compulsions. Egypt, for instance, aligned with the Soviet Union after the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict and later shifted towards the United States under Anwar Sadat. India, another founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, initially sought Western assistance after the 1962 war with China but later developed close defence ties with the Soviet Union.

Smaller states, facing internal instability and weak political institutions, often relied on external powers for regime survival. This resulted in the establishment of foreign military bases and defence agreements, which contradicted the ideal of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

Thus, littoral politics in the region has been characterized by a constant tension between autonomy and dependency.

Strategic and Economic Importance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean occupies a central position in global economic and strategic networks. It serves as a major maritime highway connecting the economies of Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. A significant proportion of the world's oil and trade flows passes through this region.

Two of the most critical maritime chokepoints—the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal–Gulf of Aden route—are located within the Indian Ocean. Any disruption in these routes would have serious consequences for global trade and energy security.

The region is also rich in natural resources such as hydrocarbons, minerals, fisheries, and seabed resources. These resources are crucial for the economic development of littoral states as well as for industrial economies dependent on imports.

As a result, both regional and extra-regional powers have strong incentives to maintain a strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.

Emerging Security Challenges

In the contemporary period, the Indian Ocean faces a range of non-traditional security challenges that complicate regional stability.

Maritime piracy has emerged as a major threat, particularly around the Horn of Africa and the Strait of Malacca. Similarly, the presence of narcotics production zones such as the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan region) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar region) has contributed to illegal trafficking networks across the Indian Ocean.

These activities often finance terrorism and illegal arms trade, posing serious threats to regional security. India, in particular, faces challenges from narco-terrorism and maritime infiltration linked to insurgency in Kashmir and the North-East.

These developments have increased the importance of maritime surveillance, naval cooperation, and regional security frameworks.

India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region

India occupies a central geographical and strategic position in the Indian Ocean region. Since independence, it has steadily developed its naval capabilities to safeguard its maritime interests.

With support from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, India strengthened its naval infrastructure and defence capabilities. Over time, it has emerged as a key regional maritime power.

India's strategic objectives include:

- Protection of sea lanes of communication
- Ensuring energy security
- Combating piracy and maritime terrorism
- Enhancing regional cooperation

India's growing engagement with Indo-Pacific frameworks and maritime partnerships reflects its aspiration to play a leading role in shaping the security architecture of the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean in the Era of Globalization

Globalization has further enhanced the strategic relevance of the Indian Ocean. The region now acts as a critical hub of international trade, investment, and energy transportation. Economic interdependence among countries has increased, but so has competition for maritime resources, ports, and infrastructure. External powers such as the United States, China, Japan, and European countries continue to maintain strong strategic and economic interests in the region.

Regional organizations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) aim to promote cooperation in trade, security, and sustainable development, but challenges of political instability and strategic rivalry continue to persist.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Indian Ocean politics from World War II to the era of globalization reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, strategic rivalries, and economic transformations. The end of colonial rule did not eliminate

external influence but replaced it with new forms of superpower competition and strategic engagement. During the Cold War, the Indian Ocean became a militarized geopolitical arena. In the contemporary era, globalization has increased economic interdependence while simultaneously intensifying competition for strategic and economic resources.

Littoral states continue to balance their sovereignty with the need for security and economic support from major powers. India's emergence as a regional maritime power represents a significant shift in the regional balance. For the Indian Ocean to evolve into a zone of peace and prosperity, there is a need for cooperative security arrangements, respect for international maritime law, and inclusive regional governance. Only through collective effort can the region overcome its challenges and realize its full potential in the globalized world.

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