

UNCDIS - COMMITTEE ON DISARMAMENT AND SECURITY



**Issue: The question of the Naval Arms Race in Emerging
Hotspots**

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Introduction

In this constantly changing multipolar global situation, maritime spaces are increasing in geopolitical influence. In the Post-Cold War climate, nations are becoming more interdependent due to technological advancements, transport and communication, a phenomenon described as “globalisation”. Nations shift towards the naval race especially in certain regions such as but not limited to the Indo-Pacific in the Southern hemisphere. With emphasis on chokepoints, nations are racing for economic and strategic hold over these places.

Major economies and regional powers, India or China, or western powers are projecting increased military armament in coming years to combat piracy and protect maritime trade and communication. However the rise of presence generates tensions, jeopardizes peace and raises the risk of nuclear threats and economic sanction in the chokepoints which would affect the global economy.

As said by Ece Dumanlar, journalist for the Atlas Institute for International Affairs, “There is a new type of global arms race developing with destabilizing potential for the world.”. Today’s situation is not merely a conventional arms race between major powers but rather competition among emerging nations seeking influence and a geopolitical attempt to monopolize power by developed countries. These states are weaponizing their industrial capabilities to enhance strategic autonomy, regional influence and diplomatic leverage.



Key terms

Naval Arms Race :

The naval arms race refers to the competitive buildup of naval capabilities among nations, particularly in terms of warships, submarines, and associated technologies. This phenomenon is driven by the pursuit of maritime dominance and strategic deterrence, often influenced by geopolitical tensions.

Hotspots to focus on :

- Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal
- Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, Persian Gulf

Multipolar :

A multipolar world is one in which power is distributed among multiple states or blocs, rather than dominated by a single superpower (unipolarity) or two major powers (bipolarity).

Common characteristics:

- Absence of a sole global hegemon
- Rise of regional powers with global influence
- Competing values, interests, and governance models
- Diverse and fragmented international institutions

Chokepoints :

Narrow points of passage crucial for global commerce and security, funnelling the bulk of trade.

Key chokepoints: Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Malacca Strait.

- **Strait of Hormuz:** Transports ~20% of the world's oil; strategic concern for regional and global actors.



- **Bab-el-Mandeb:** Connects Red Sea to Arabian Sea; vital for trade between the Mediterranean Sea, Asia, and Europe.
- **Strait of Malacca:** Connects Indian Ocean to the Pacific; key for East Asia–Europe trade.

String of Pearls Strategy :

China's initiative to establish a network of military and commercial facilities along maritime routes from China to Port Sudan.

- **Key components:** Dual-use ports (e.g., Gwadar, Hambantota, Kyaukpyu) and strategic influence.

Indo-Pacific Strategy :

A geopolitical concept combining the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions, emphasizing their economic and security interdependence. Central stage for U.S.–China–India competition.

Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) :

Major maritime routes used for trade, naval, and logistics purposes. Controlling them provides strategic advantage.

Blue-Water Navy :

A navy capable of operating globally across deep oceans, far from home bases.

Freedom of Navigation (FON) :

Principle under international law that ships and aircraft can move freely through international waters.

- Applies to militarization, not non-state threats.

Maritime Zones :

- Territorial waters: 12 nautical miles = sovereign territory



- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ): 200 nm = use of resources but cannot restrict passage
- High seas: Open to all

Grey-Zone Warfare :

Actions below open conflict, such as surveillance, harassment, cyberattacks, or deploying militia ships, to pressure rivals without triggering war.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) :

Monitoring and sharing information about ship movements, threats, and activity at sea.

Dual-Use Infrastructure :

Facilities serving both civilian and military purposes, e.g., many “String of Pearls” ports.

Asymmetric Naval Warfare :

Use of cheaper, unconventional tactics (fast attack boats, drones, mines) to offset superior fleets.

Deterrence Theory :

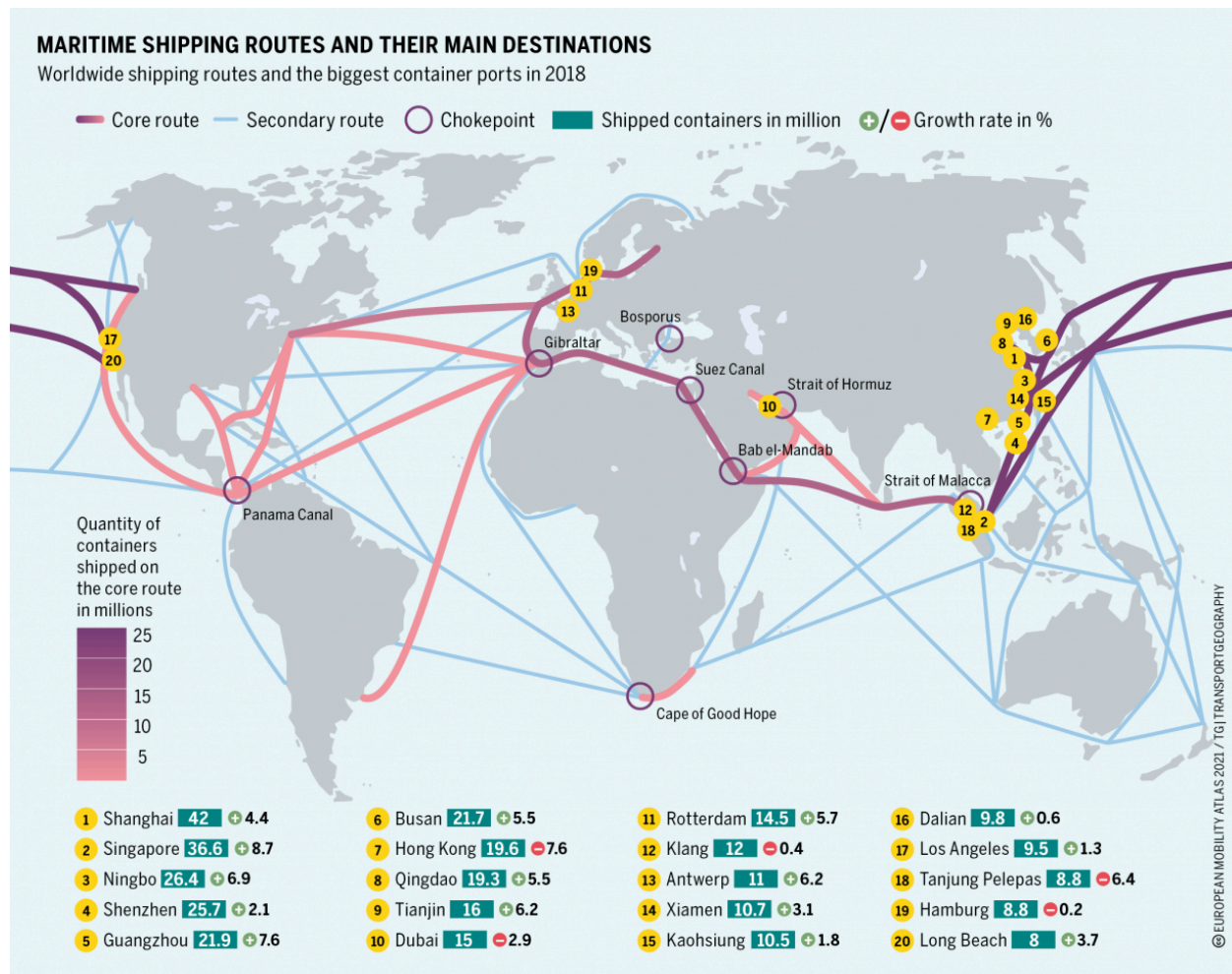
Possession of powerful weapons (e.g., nuclear-armed submarines) discourages others from attacking due to fear of retaliation.

General Overview:

During the Cold War period, the multi-sectorial race between the United States and the Soviet Union grew to the maritime spaces. Both mega-powers built alliances with regional states, and established a strong presence in the Indo-Pacific region via military installations. One key phenomenon in this influence war was proxy competition through Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China. While military force was not employed, the USSR, through defense agreements with regional countries, sought naval influence.



In the following years, due to the Soviet collapse, the Indian Ocean became multipolar. With its military bases, such as on the Diego Garcia Island,, the US maintained a presence in the Indian Ocean, competing against China's increased naval presence to protect oil supply routes through theirString of Pearls strategy. South East Asian nations increased their defense budgets and expanded infrastructure partnerships.



Around 80% of global trade and 60% of energy shipments pass through these seas

Rebel groups pursue attacks and impose economic, cost and time challenges, notably in the Red and Arabian Seas, as well as in the Horn of Africa.



These challenges require a great amount of budget, inaccessible to most countries, thus digging them into insufficient funding for their domestic policies. On a geopolitical scale, states, such as France, the US, China are competing for overseas territory such as bases, for example in Djibouti, creating military tension on the coastlines. While nations are pushing their geographical limits, such as China expanding its EEZ into the Indian Ocean, the legal frameworks governing such practices are weakened, such as the Freedom of Navigation, whose vagueness is exploited.

Major parties involved

United States

- Significant naval presence in the Indian Ocean as part of its larger Indo-Pacific strategy. Diego Garcia, a naval post in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), is the most significant U.S. military facility in the area. This base is an important hub for American operations in the Asian Pacific, Central Asia and the Middle East.

China

- Increased naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Central to this is the “String of Pearls” strategy—a network of ports and bases from China to Africa—aimed at securing trade routes, energy supplies, and control over key maritime chokepoints. China's 2017 establishment of a base in Djibouti is among the most important recent milestones of its naval expansion. Djibouti is in a strategic location in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the entry to the Red Sea and a chokepoint through which a large portion of global traffic travels,

India

- Actively seeking navy modernization and extending its maritime reach as the leading regional force. India considers the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to be its principal work. India's strategic location in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, close to the Strait of Malacca, has made it possible to oppose both Western and Chinese naval activity in the area. Additionally, India's strategic position



in the Indian Ocean as well as the Indo-Pacific has been strengthened by its cooperation with nations such as the U.S., Japan, and Australia through the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). India has partnered with nations like the Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives as a result of its desire in expanding and gaining access to important ports in the area.

France

- Maintains a strong and persisting naval presence in the Indian Ocean supported by its overseas territories like Réunion and Mayotte. They also conduct joint exercises and patrols in coordination with their regional partners and contribute to maritime security operations, anti-piracy efforts, and disaster relief efforts. The region holds strategic importance for France, as it seeks to safeguard freedom of navigation, protect its citizens, and defend its economic interests.

Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Qatar)

- The Gulf States are becoming increasingly active in the Indian Ocean due to their heavy reliance on maritime trade for energy exports. Saudi Arabia is investing in port infrastructure along the Arabian Sea (especially in Gwadar, Pakistan) to ensure some alternative trade routes beyond the Persian Gulf. Qatar, although maintaining a smaller naval presence, relies on strong partnerships with Western and regional navies to ensure the safety of key shipping lanes essential for its energy (such as LNG) exports.

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)

- They collectively play a stabilizing role in the eastern Indian Ocean, especially through maritime cooperation initiatives. And member states such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia play an important role in maintaining freedom of navigation through the Malacca Strait, one of the world's most important trade routes. The organization promotes dialogue and multilateral activities to manage maritime security and balance the influence of major power competition across the Indo-Pacific region.



European Union (EU)

- The EU ensures regional stability through their Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the northwestern Indian Ocean. Their activities focus on anti-piracy missions (such as the Atlanta operation), maritime domain awareness, and the protection of major commercial shipping routes. The EU demonstrates its commitment in maintaining an open communication and combating illicit maritime activities.

Russia

- Looking to restore its naval influence in the Indian Ocean after years of limited engagements. They have strengthened their military cooperation with India and other regional powers through joint exercises and access agreements, especially with Sudan for their potential naval infrastructures. Russia's growing partnership with China in the region also reflects their want to challenge Western dominance and promote a multipolar maritime order.

Timeline

Cold War (1970s–1980s)

- The Soviet Navy maintains a strong presence (8th Operational Squadron) to counter US influence.
- Regional navies (e.g., India) focus on local defense.
- Tanker War (1981–1988): Iran and Iraq attack merchant vessels in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.
- US Operation Earnest Will (1987–1988): Protects Kuwaiti oil tankers and deters Iranian aggression.
- UK Armilla Patrol: Reactivated in response to Gulf tensions.

1990s



- India shifts toward “blue-water” ambitions, expanding maritime diplomacy and overseas presence.
- Navies maintain a presence in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea.
- Bab al-Mandeb’s strategic importance rises due to global trade via the Suez & Red Sea corridor.
- Saudi, UAE, and Iranian navies gradually modernize.

2000s

- China expands naval presence: ships, submarines, dual-use bases (Djibouti).
- India begins serious procurement of submarines, destroyers, and carriers, including indigenous projects.
- Iran invests in asymmetric capabilities: fast boats, missile boats, anti-ship missiles, submarines.
- Gulf states modernize surface fleets, maritime domain awareness, and form partnerships with Western navies.

2010s

- India commissions a second aircraft carrier; launches Scorpène-class and Kalvari-class submarines and plans for around 200 warships by 2035.
- China grows its submarine fleet (SSBNs, SSNs), creating undersea competition for India.
- Red Sea corridor threatened by missile/drone attacks (Houthis), leading to more Western/Gulf naval deployments.
- Saudi Arabia modernizes the fleet and strengthens its role in maritime security.
- India develops new naval bases (INS Varsha) to strengthen its strategic footprint in the Bay of Bengal.

2020s–Present



- India aims for 200 warships and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) by 2035.
- Pakistan, with Chinese support (submarines), contributes to regional arms dynamics.
- Bay of Bengal gains strategic prominence for India.
- Bab al-Mandeb / Red Sea corridors face drone and missile threats (e.g., Houthis), prompting increased naval deployments.
- Saudi Arabia modernizes the Eastern Fleet and strengthens regional maritime leadership.
- India monitors strategic corridors vital for energy flows and sea-lines of communication.

Conclusion

To conclude, the tensions surrounding the rise of armament in the Indo-Pacific region continues to lead to economic consequences for states redistributing their national budget. Consequently, with the now ever so present trade vulnerabilities, and greater interdependence, alliances are shifting, resulting in the risk of escalation, higher nuclear deterrence state. The Indian Ocean remains a lifeline for global trade and energy movement, connecting the Middle East with East Asia. Strategic chokepoints like the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz continue to shape the balance of power in the region. Today's competition is no longer about massive fleets alone—it's increasingly defined by drones, missiles, and agile naval capabilities, signaling a new phase of strategic rivalry. As China and Russia expand their presence in what was once a U.S.- and Gulf-dominated space, the region faces heightened power competition and growing uncertainty about its future stability.



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