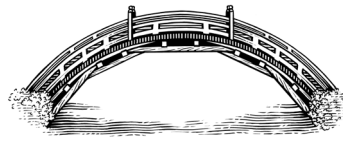


ROUNDTABLE

Strategic Futures for the Indian Ocean



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Indian Ocean Strategic Futures: Re-examining Assumptions of Capability and Intent

Arzan Tarapore and David Brewster

In April 1989 a *Time* magazine cover story declared that India was “determinedly transforming itself into a regional superpower.” The trends were compelling: India was strenuously building its military, it was already the world’s largest weapons importer, and it was on the cusp of building nuclear weapons. Its military had recently seized control of the Siachen glacier, muscled its way into Sri Lanka, and decisively intervened in Maldives. But New Delhi’s strategic intentions were unclear. Some countries around the Indian Ocean were looking upon this newly brawny India with a degree of unease. “What,” the article asked, “does India intend to do with all that power?”¹ Australia was one of those uneasy countries. Even if bilateral relations were cordial, there was significant concern that India’s rapidly growing military power and “disconcerting predisposition to use force” could destabilize the Indian Ocean region.²

The world changed quickly. The end of the Cold War, India’s economic opening, and the emergence of new regional threats—especially Chinese power—clarified not only New Delhi’s strategic preferences but also regional states’ views of the country. The United States, followed in quick order by allies like Australia, brushed aside any lingering qualms and embraced India as a favored strategic partner. India would be particularly important in securing the Indian Ocean, a thoroughfare of globally critical sea lanes. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking on the shores of the Indian Ocean at Chennai in 2011, proclaimed that India was, “with us, a

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¹ Ross H. Munro, “India: The Awakening of an Asian Power,” *Time*, April 3, 1989.

² Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade (Australia), *Australia-India Relations: Trade and Security* (Canberra, July 1990), 71 ~ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Completed_inquiries/pre1996/india_trade_security/index.

steward of these waterways.”³ U.S. strategy, directed toward an escalating competition with China, now sees the Indian Ocean as inseparable from the Pacific—combined in an organic Indo-Pacific whole—and India as a linchpin partner in it.⁴ As the United States plans to redouble its military power in the western Pacific, it is relying on India to grow more powerful and help safeguard their shared interests in the Indian Ocean, easing demands on U.S. resources in that region.

But that will not be the end of the story. India remains the most consequential strategic actor in the Indian Ocean by virtue of its geographic centrality, economic and military power, and abiding networks of influence across the region. But its capabilities and intentions—and therefore the strategic trajectory of the Indian Ocean—will continue to evolve as they have since the uncertain days of 1989 and long before. What if in the coming years India fails to expand its military power as its champions expect and instead is outmatched by China in the Indian Ocean? Or what if, in the throes of competition with China, India exercises its power more nakedly than its regional partners would wish? Relatedly, what if the United States, which has for decades underwritten regional security, chooses to retrench its strategic presence to focus efforts in the western Pacific? Policymakers in Washington, Canberra, and regional capitals would be well-advised to accept that many trajectories—some sharply divergent—are possible.

This essay offers a preliminary attempt at illustrating some of those sharply divergent scenarios. It uses a novel alternative futures methodology known as major/minor trends to derive scenarios of Indian and U.S. strategic behavior and their resulting effects on the Indian Ocean region. The essay briefly introduces the methodology and then sketches three alternative futures designed around a relatively weaker India, an aggressive India, and a retrenching United States, respectively. Each scenario is designed to convey a key lesson for policymakers on the fragility of the assumptions that underpin current policy.

³ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century,” U.S. Department of State, July 20, 2011 ~ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>.

⁴ U.S. National Security Council, “United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific,” February 2018 ~ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

THE METHOD OF MAJOR/MINOR TRENDS

Alternative futures analysis is designed to illustrate the range of ways a situation may evolve. It is expressly not a tool of prediction. It does not seek to assess the most likely outcome but rather to reveal the span of what is possible, including—or especially—less likely future trajectories that cognitive biases may otherwise overlook.⁵ Decision-makers thus armed with alternative futures or scenarios analysis should be less prone to surprise when events take an unexpected turn, even if the specific trajectory was never precisely anticipated. An awareness of possible futures should allow decision-makers to react more quickly to indications of change in the status quo, ensuring that policies adapt and ideally even shaping unfolding events in a more favorable direction.

Most alternative futures methods rely on creative brainstorming—exercises in imagination deliberately divorced from empirical reality. In contrast, the method of major/minor trends is fundamentally rooted in a close reading of the historical record. Tarapore originally outlined the method's principles as follows:

The method is premised on the insight that future behavior—even surprising future behavior—does not spring from nowhere but rather evolves from observable past actions, preferences, and constraints. Every future scenario can trace its antecedents in a series of events, or a “trend.” When a future is not very surprising—that is, only an incremental evolution from the past—it represents a continuation of the major trend of events, which is generally easily observed and understood through the orthodox narrative of events. When a future is surprising or unanticipated, it springs from the minor trend, which is characterized by exceptions to the major trend that do not fit the dominant pattern of behavior. Evidence of the minor trend may be dismissed and explained away by contemporaries as infrequent aberrations—a trend only in retrospect.

Surprising futures occur when that minor trend is catalyzed into a new major trend. Under certain new environmental conditions—either some attributes of the actor or a completely exogenous shock—the actors in question follow new or newly salient incentives, adopting new patterns of behavior. The previously unusual becomes the new normal, yielding a surprising future or a paradigm shift. But the new dominant behavior always sprouts from a latent tendency—antecedent actions, preferences, or constraints. Likewise, every new major strain of behavior also accommodates its own exceptions. The new major trend comes

⁵ Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1996).

with a new minor trend. Thus, the major and minor trends occur concurrently: the major trend is readily apparent even to casual observers and is the dominant narrative about a given issue. But the minor trend is also empirically observable to subject-matter experts who know where to look.⁶

The three scenarios described in this essay follow the same broad structure:

1. Identifying the major trend, or the actor's normal strategic behavior or preference, given prevailing historical conditions.
2. Identifying a corresponding minor trend, or unusual behavior that contemporaries may dismiss as random or unlikely to repeat.
3. Describing a fictitious scenario in which India or the United States adopts a posture that observers today might consider unlikely, but which is nevertheless grounded in observed antecedents and a plausible reordering of incentives.

In each of these scenarios, the deviation of strategic behavior directly and inescapably reshapes the Indian Ocean strategic environment.

SCENARIO 1: NOT INDIA'S OCEAN

The first scenario highlights the possibility of a precipitous decline in India's relative military power in the Indian Ocean. This scenario contrasts the major trend of a slow but steady naval modernization and operational activity with a minor trend of a persistently vulnerable homeland requiring significant military investment.

Major Trend: The Military Expansion of a Rising Great Power

As India has expanded its strategic interests in recent decades, the Indian Navy has also expanded both its capabilities and its operational activities. This expansion was propelled by the growth of two threats: the potential for seaborne infiltration of terrorists, such as those that perpetrated the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai; and China's military expansion in the Indian Ocean with the deployment of a permanent task group, the construction of an overseas base in Djibouti, and an increasing tempo of operational patrols. Together, these developments sharpened India's ambitions in both its coastal

⁶ Arzan Tarapore, "Exploring India's Strategic Futures," National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report, no. 88, September 2020, 4  <https://www.nbr.org/publication/exploring-indias-strategic-futures>.

waters and the farthest reaches of the Indian Ocean. The country's 2015 maritime security strategy committed the navy to the goal of achieving sea control to enable its operations and declared most of the Indian Ocean, including all perimeter chokepoints, as a primary area of maritime interest.⁷ This conception of Indian maritime interests traces its lineage back at least to pre-independence naval theorist K.M. Panikkar, who argued that India's security rested on dominance in the Indian Ocean, which in turn rested on control of its key chokepoints.⁸

In accordance with these ambitions, the navy's modernization plans are centered on maritime domain awareness and force projection across the entire ocean. The centerpiece of these long-term plans are aircraft carrier battle groups, as well as an emphasis on submarines and antisubmarine warfare capabilities. The navy has also begun to acquire P-8I long-range multi-mission aircraft and MH-60R helicopters and has leased Sea Guardian long-endurance surveillance drones. These acquisitions not only add high-technology platforms for maritime domain awareness but also enable unprecedented interoperability with the U.S. and Australian navies. Additionally, India has taken steps to build situational awareness and strategic influence among smaller regional states. It has inaugurated a series of coastal surveillance radars, including in partner countries across the region, and established an information fusion center that shares data with partners.

The Indian Navy's recent operational activities have been similarly designed to extend its reach and influence. It now maintains around-the-clock presence patrols, known as mission-based deployments, at key chokepoints in the region.⁹ It has conducted a range of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations across and beyond the Indian Ocean. The navy has increased the tempo and complexity of multilateral training exercises, including with highly capable partners such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. And it maintains a robust security cooperation program, supplying military equipment and training to partner countries from Mozambique to Myanmar. The Indian Navy still must struggle to compete for scarce resources, but its ambitions, capabilities, and activities have all slowly yet steadily expanded over the past two decades in line with its strategic interests.

⁷ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi, October 2015).

⁸ K.M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, 2nd ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962).

⁹ Sujan Dutta, "Indian Navy Informs Government about the Fleet's Reoriented Mission Pattern," *New Indian Express*, April 1, 2018.

Minor Trend: Defending the Homeland

Even as India has begun to gradually expand its military presence in the Indian Ocean region, it remains vulnerable along its land borders. Colonial India feared encroachments along its northern periphery, and independent India has similarly concentrated strategic attention on its disputed borders. Since independence, India has fought five wars along those borders and suffered many more militarized crises and war scares. The military is dominated by the army, which accounts for 57% of the defense budget and 85% of military personnel, while the navy remains the smallest and least-resourced service.¹⁰ These threat perceptions and organizational biases have long dominated India's strategic elite and defense priorities. But in the context of a rising great power with expanding regional interests, the persistence of continental security threats is a minor trend.

In recent decades, even as the Indian Navy expanded into the Indian Ocean, the homeland continued to demand significant military investment. Although India has apparently established mutual deterrence against both its rivals, China and Pakistan, threats to the homeland persist. From Pakistan, India faces intermittent state-sponsored terrorist attacks; from China, it faces intermittent threats to its territorial boundary. These threats are politically very salient. When Indians have lost their lives and foreign troops have occupied Indian land, political leaders cannot easily defer military action. Thus, terrorist attacks at Uri in 2016 and Pulwama in 2019 elicited Indian counterstrikes; the ongoing 2020–21 crisis in Ladakh prompted the retasking of an army strike corps, which itself came after the partial raising of a new mountain strike corps to deter China. As much as New Delhi may prefer to extend its strategic influence across the Indian Ocean region, it cannot escape the priority of investing military resources and accepting strategic risk to defend its insecure homeland.

Future Scenario: India Fails to Show Up

In this scenario, the 2020–22 border crisis in Ladakh has had a long-term impact on Indian defense planning. In response to multiple deadly skirmishes and perennial Chinese infiltration attempts, the Indian

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence (India), *Annual Report 2018–2019* (New Delhi, 2018), 16  <https://mod.gov.in/sites/default/files/MoDAR2018.pdf>; and International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2020* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 270.

Army retasked several formations to the China front. After a Pakistani attack in Jammu reignited fears of a two-front conflict, however, New Delhi decided that its best option was to raise a fifth strike corps. The new joint acquisitions and planning structures, including the creation of a unified chief of defense staff, were designed to facilitate coordination and reduce duplication, but in response to these new national security emergencies, they in fact have served to remove prior institutional barriers to army domination. The other services, in losing their independent planning powers, have also lost their institutional guarantees of separate acquisitions. India has indefinitely postponed the procurement of new naval vessels and armed maritime drones.

China, meanwhile, has continued its naval expansion uninterrupted. In a first, it has homeported surface combatants and coast guard militia ships at a new naval base in Myanmar. Undeterred by India's small and aging navy, China frequently deploys its third aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal. Beijing judges that the time is right to press its claims near Indonesia's Natuna Islands. Its Myanmar-based militia ships sink an Indonesian vessel while a carrier battle group takes position in the Andaman Sea to deter any retaliation.

The United States, Australia, and Japan, which have all invested in civil infrastructure in the Natunas, decide to mount a show-of-force naval patrol in the disputed waters. India declines to participate. Its navy is operationally stretched. Individual ships still maintain the mission-based deployments in the Andaman Sea and near the Malacca Strait, but the Indian Navy cannot reinforce them. Given the navy's minimal capital budget, its aging frigates on patrol also lack the new artificial intelligence-enabled close-in weapons system that has been mounted on the U.S., Australian, and Japanese ships. Indian forces stationed on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were never hardened with advanced air defenses. India judges that its deployed forces are too vulnerable. It offers diplomatic support for Indonesia and places its forces on higher alert but otherwise resiles from any military action. New Delhi has, in effect, conceded that it no longer dominates the Bay of Bengal region and must accept that it cannot disrupt China's military activities there. Without a dependable Indian presence, Canberra and its partners must decide how much risk they are willing to accept to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific.

SCENARIO 2: AN ILLIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The second scenario illustrates the risk of an India that competes aggressively for influence in the Indian Ocean region. In the major trend, India's approach to strategic competition eschews open acts of bellicosity; but this scenario also reveals a minor trend of India escalating force or taking pre-emptive action under certain strategic conditions.

Major Trend: Defending the Status Quo

India is normally a status quo strategic actor. Most of its uses of military force—even when it escalated a conflict—were designed to defend its territory and the status quo. Even in instances when India gained territory in wartime, such as the wars against Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, it assiduously preserved the status quo by not retaining those territorial gains. In the Indian Ocean region, it uses military operations primarily to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief or to support freedom of navigation. Indeed, India's shared interest in preserving the status quo is the foundation of its burgeoning strategic partnerships with the United States, Australia, and other like-minded partners.

India's tactics in its strategic competition with China generally eschew direct military confrontation. Aware of the unfavorable balance of relative power, New Delhi is careful not to provoke its stronger adversary, and relies instead on other instruments of national power where it enjoys a relative advantage. Thus, for example, in Sri Lanka in 2015 and Maldives in 2018, outspoken and domestically powerful pro-China leaders were surprisingly replaced in elections by pro-India opposition leaders—amid speculation that Indian diplomats and intelligence helped sway voting.¹¹ In the ongoing Ladakh border crisis, India had no viable options to punish China militarily, but it did threaten their potentially lucrative commercial relationship by temporarily tightening foreign investment rules and warning of a continuing deterioration in bilateral relations. For years, India resisted inviting Australia to join the Malabar naval exercises and slowed the evolution of the Quad. Some Western observers came to regard India as a frustrating partner.¹² In fact, its commitment to competing with China

¹¹ John Chalmers and Sanjeev Miglani, "Indian Spy's Role Alleged in Sri Lankan President's Election Defeat," Reuters, January 18, 2015.

¹² See, for example, Derek Grossman, "India Is the Weakest Link in the Quad," *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2018.

is firm. Yet, as the weaker side in the competition, India has been careful to avoid destabilizing the status quo and has had to manage with limited, wasted, or misallocated means.

Minor Trend: Striking When Conditions Are Right

Under certain conditions, India has deployed military force decisively, even aggressively, to undermine other states' sovereignty. When New Delhi has enjoyed a clear advantage in relative military power, and assessed it could manage the risk of escalation, it took action to change the status quo. Most notably, in the 1971 war India launched an overwhelming invasion of what was then East Pakistan, which collapsed and became the newly independent Bangladesh. India later seized control of the Siachen glacier in 1984, launched a short-notice expedition to thwart a coup attempt in Maldives in 1988, and launched an expeditionary campaign to Sri Lanka that lasted from 1987 to 1990 and quickly degenerated into a counterinsurgency morass. More recently, in 2016 and 2019, it retaliated against Pakistan for terrorist attacks, determined to signal that the status quo of unanswered terrorism was changing.

In most of these cases, India's military initiative was unilateral, swift, and limited. India preferred to act alone because the operations were aimed at securing national interests rather than a global public good. Acting with partners or a multilateral institution would have presented unhelpful fetters. In most cases, India acted quickly, with operational surprise and successfully maintaining secrecy lest a belabored military buildup invite a third-party diplomatic or military intervention to disrupt Indian plans. And in most cases, the operation consisted of a single mission designed to achieve a tightly circumscribed objective to minimize the risk of a prolonged and escalating conflict (with the failed Sri Lanka campaign being a significant exception). When India's uses of military force were effective, they were based on sound assessments of quickly achievable political goals.

Future Scenario: The India We've Been Waiting For?

Ladakh was the wakeup call. Belatedly, the Indian juggernaut has been roused into a more active posture. For years China had been building its political influence and military capabilities in the Indian Ocean region while soothing New Delhi with promises of summitry and lavish foreign direct investment. In the 2020–22 crisis in Ladakh, however, China spilled Indian blood several times and used cyberattacks to wreak extensive havoc on India's critical infrastructure. A popular strain of public opinion likens

the crisis to a replay of the 1962 war, which was a national humiliation that exposed Indian vulnerabilities. A new nationalist government vows to even the score. Emboldened by improved economic growth and enamored by modest new military acquisitions, the government promises a zero-tolerance policy against Chinese encroachments into India's self-proclaimed sphere of influence. Western governments are pleasantly surprised.

In Maldives, history seems to be repeating. A newly elected president accepts a major package of Chinese technical assistance to manage the threat of climate change. To much of the world—including Washington and Canberra—this is cautiously welcomed as an example of responsible Chinese statecraft. To New Delhi, it is seen as a direct affront and a threat to India's role in the region. Having proclaimed that its credibility is at stake, the Indian government dispatches paratroopers to Malé. New Delhi maintains the public narrative that it is defending the will of the Maldivian people. Its troops swiftly take the Maldivian cabinet into custody, but then the operation almost immediately begins to fall apart. After India's chosen successor refuses to take the oath of office, the Indian military acts as an interim administrator of Maldives, and public anger boils over against Indian troops.

International opinion demands that India restore the *status quo ante*, but that would be an intolerable capitulation for New Delhi. The crisis drags on for several months as India searches for a face-saving solution. France cancels a planned naval exercise with India, Bangladesh refuses a high-level Indian military delegation, and Indonesia suspends construction activity at Sabang port. India's reputation plummets, and China leads a "Quit Maldives" campaign against India in the United Nations and on social media. The United States, Australia, and like-minded partners are placed in an impossible position, knowing that defending India's transgression of Maldivian sovereignty, for the sake of competition with China, has actually strengthened China's hand.

SCENARIO 3: THE UNITED STATES' WEST OF SINGAPORE MOMENT

The third scenario examines the potential for a precipitous retrenchment from the Indian Ocean region by the U.S. military in response to the unsustainable costs of maintaining its global posture and growing strategic imperatives elsewhere. This scenario contrasts the major trend of

continued U.S. predominance in the Indian Ocean with the minor trend of U.S. strategic constraints and changing priorities.

Major Trend: Security Guarantor of the Indian Ocean

The United States has been the predominant military power in the Indian Ocean since the late 1970s when a confluence of events fundamentally altered the strategic environment. The 1979 Iranian revolution signaled the loss of Washington's most important regional ally. This was followed by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which many perceived as a first step toward the "warm waters" of the Indian Ocean that would directly threaten the Persian Gulf. There were fears that the Soviet Union might use its regional military superiority to gain influence with Gulf states and seize Iranian territory and oil fields, potentially shifting the global balance of power decisively in its favor.

These developments caused Washington to make a major modification to its global strategic posture, laying the foundation for U.S. policy in the Indian Ocean. In his January 1980 State of the Union address, President Jimmy Carter declared what later became known as the Carter Doctrine: "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."¹³ Whereas Carter focused on external threats, President Ronald Reagan later pledged to defend the internal security of the United States' Gulf allies, particularly Saudi Arabia. Through these pronouncements, the United States explicitly made the Persian Gulf a core U.S. security interest and assumed the role of regional security manager in what appears to be a virtually permanent commitment to the region.

The end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of Soviet forces cemented U.S. predominance in the Indian Ocean region. U.S. defense resources are concentrated in the northwest, in and around the Persian Gulf, reflecting the United States' perceptions of its interests. In recent decades, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required supporting air and naval forces in the Persian Gulf and strategic sustainment through the Indian Ocean. The U.S.

¹³ Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union before a Joint Session of Congress," (Washington, D.C., January 23, 1980), republished in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, vol 1, *Foundations of Foreign Policy*, ed. Kristin L. Ahlberg (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2014), document 138 ~ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d138>.

base at Diego Garcia in the central Indian Ocean also plays a pivotal role in providing air and naval logistical support for the United States throughout the broader region.

Minor Trend: Decline in U.S. Strategic Interests in the Indian Ocean

Despite the operational requirement to support forces in combat, at least two broader trends have increasingly drawn Washington's attention away from the greater Indian Ocean region. First, the United States is far less dependent on energy from the Persian Gulf. Technological advances in the extraction of oil and gas have led to massive production increases in North America over the past decade. In 2019, imports from the Persian Gulf constituted only about 5% of overall domestic oil consumption, down from 24.5% in 1990.¹⁴ In 2019, the United States became a net exporter of natural gas.¹⁵ In 2020, the United States was the world's largest producer of crude oil and became a net exporter of petroleum.¹⁶ The reduction in U.S. dependency on energy imports may be further magnified by increased use of non-hydrocarbon energy sources in the future. The United States' much-reduced dependence on Persian Gulf energy represents a major change in U.S. strategic interests in the region. Washington will have more options, including not acting in response to contingencies. A U.S. administration might not always feel compelled to protect energy being exported to China or other countries. It may conclude instead that whatever intangible benefits might accrue from U.S. military dominance of the Gulf are outweighed by their huge and very measurable financial costs.

A second trend diverting U.S. attention from the Indian Ocean region in the past decade is that the United States has increasingly prioritized strategic competition with China and Russia. This has led to growing perceptions that the Indian Ocean is a secondary theater in U.S. global priorities.

The U.S.-China relationship continues to grow increasingly tense, making the western Pacific the principal concern in U.S. priorities. In particular, Chinese territorial claims over Taiwan and the South China

¹⁴ "The Weekly Focus: A Market and Economic Update," Standard Life, October 8, 2012.

¹⁵ "United States Has Been a Net Exporter of Natural Gas for More than 12 Consecutive Months," U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), May 2, 2019 ~ <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39312>.

¹⁶ "Annual Petroleum and Other Liquids Production," EIA; and "Oil and Petroleum Products Explained," EIA ~ <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/oil-and-petroleum-products/imports-and-exports.php>.

Sea have focused Washington's attention on the western Pacific as the most likely locus of conflict with China. The United States has accordingly begun to devote significant new resources to reinforcing its defense posture there.¹⁷ Moreover, the U.S. Navy is also paying more attention to the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, which have become increasingly interconnected from the U.S. perspective due to the great-power threats from China and Russia. Recent U.S. strategy documents and official statements focus on the Pacific, and increasingly also the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, suggesting that the Indian Ocean is becoming recognized as secondary in the hierarchy of Washington's concerns.¹⁸

Future Scenario: Drawdown in U.S. Defense Resources from West of Singapore

In the years following the 2020–22 Covid-19 pandemic, the United States faced a major economic crisis that increasingly forces major cuts in defense expenditure. Newly elected president Kamala Harris has directed the Pentagon to review the extent of U.S. military commitments around the globe—chief among them the U.S. commitment in the Persian Gulf.

Congressional critics of the U.S. presence in the Gulf argue that the United States should not be spending blood and treasure to protect oil that is largely destined for China. They also point to a significant reduction in regional tensions following a new comprehensive agreement with Tehran under which Iran ceased its nuclear weapons program and many of its subversive activities around the region. However, this agreement was accompanied by a souring of relations between Washington and the Arab Gulf states.

The U.S. position in the Indian Ocean has not been helped by the recent election of a Labour government in the United Kingdom, which announced that it will begin to return administration of the British Indian Ocean Territory to Mauritius. The government of Mauritius then announced that the “window of opportunity had closed” on negotiations for the

¹⁷ Joe Gould, “Eyeing China, Indo-Pacific Command Seeks \$27 Billion Deterrence Fund,” *DefenseNews*, March 1, 2021 ≈ <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2021/03/02/eyeing-china-indo-pacific-command-seeks-27-billion-deterrence-fund>.

¹⁸ Nilanthi Samaranyake, “U.S. Naval Strategy in the Indian Ocean” (forthcoming). For an example of such official documents, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, D.C., June 2019) ≈ <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/department-of-defense-indo-pacific-strategy-report-2019.pdf>.

continuation of the U.S. base on Diego Garcia under Mauritian sovereignty. As a result, the U.S. military is now preparing to vacate the base.

China has also been ramping up aggressive activities in the western Pacific, making a forceful takeover of Taiwan ever more likely. Many analysts believe that U.S. forces in the western Pacific are insufficient to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

President Harris responds to these developments by announcing a major change in the U.S. global military posture. In view of the heightened threat in the Pacific, the United States will withdraw the bulk of its military forces from west of Singapore, including forces stationed in the Persian Gulf and at Diego Garcia. Most of those resources will be relocated to the western Pacific (although the announcement did not include details of where and when).

In a major speech touted as the “West of Singapore Doctrine,” President Harris states that regional partners such as India and Australia will be expected to shoulder a significantly greater share of the burden of securing their neighborhood. To provide continuing support for its regional partners, the U.S. Navy adopts a “swing strategy” between the Pacific and Indian Oceans under which U.S. naval resources will be based in the Pacific but will be available to surge into the Indian Ocean in response to contingencies.

Within weeks of the West of Singapore announcement, Beijing announces the establishment of air defense identification zones covering the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait and appears to make moves in preparation for invading Taiwan. This is accompanied by a significant uptick in Chinese military activity along the Line of Actual Control between India and China. What begins as a series of probing attacks turns into a major combat operation, with Chinese forces taking control of significant areas of Indian territory.

After the Indian Navy begins interdicting Chinese-owned ships transiting the Bay of Bengal, Chinese officials comment that Beijing may respond by closing the northern Indian Ocean to all commercial shipping. Reports from Washington indicate that the U.S. Navy “will have its hands full in the Pacific” and that events in the Indian Ocean “are now of secondary concern to the United States.” U.S. allies and partners in the region—including India and Australia—must contend with a new strategic reality in which China, rather than the United States, defines the security agenda in the Indian Ocean.


POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The three scenarios depicted in this essay deliberately contain some common themes. They all involve, for example, the perennial problem of resource scarcity for states struggling to manage competing strategic interests. As China's military power grows, policymakers will have to contend not only with its expanding presence in the Indian Ocean but also with the indirect effects of its growing power in the western Pacific. More specifically, however, each scenario illuminates a particular assumption in current policy settings that should at least be examined, if not relaxed:

- India's position in the Indian Ocean region comes with a trade-off: every quantum of force it deploys to build influence in the region is a quantum it denies from its territorial defense. This is a trade-off that New Delhi may choose not to make under some circumstances.
- The more strident Indian competition against China that policymakers in Canberra and Washington often yearn for may come at some unforeseen costs. Moreover, the "like-minded" camp in the strategic competition defines itself by adherence to certain standards of behavior—however hypocritically—and this remains a strategic asset in the regional contest for influence.
- The United States can no longer take for granted its military supremacy. Even if it remains the most powerful military in the world, the U.S. military is already outnumbered by the People's Liberation Army in the western Pacific. Managing the risks of Chinese power will force the United States to make unprecedented trade-offs elsewhere.

The remainder of this roundtable examines the policy implications of these scenarios for key actors in the region. Hu Bo begins by taking a step back from the scenarios to offer an analysis of China's long-term strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, suggesting that China's intentions are currently relatively modest but could change in response to U.S. and Indian actions. Zack Cooper argues that even if the United States does not retrench so starkly from the region, its pressing interests in the western Pacific suggest that it cannot sustain previous levels of engagement in the Indian Ocean. Rohan Mukherjee argues that both Chinese expansion and relative decline in U.S. power will pressure India to invest more militarily and diplomatically in the Indian Ocean region. Peter J. Dean highlights how middle powers like Australia may be buffeted by many possible scenarios, but none would be as damaging as a reduction in U.S. military presence. Kate Sullivan de Estrada argues that minilateral groupings of

partners, such as the Quad, should be seen not only as incipient forms of security architecture but also as serving valuable “social” purposes of building norms and trust among their members. Caitlin Byrne examines what dynamics emerge from a retrenchment of U.S. and Indian presence in the Indian Ocean and discusses the potential implications for strategic partnerships in the region.

As the scenarios sketched in this essay and the policy implications discussed in the full roundtable reveal, the success of policies made in Washington, Canberra, and like-minded capitals depends on numerous factors outside their control. At best, given sufficient warning, resourcing, and nimbleness of thought, national policy may be able to shape or nudge some strategic trajectories. This alternative futures analysis seeks to identify contestable assumptions in current policy and outline key considerations for more uncertain and risky futures. 

Prospects for China's Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean

Hu Bo

There is much exaggerated speculation about China's military strategy in the Indian Ocean, including the so-called string of pearls, and military intentions for the Belt and Road Initiative. Before analyzing China's Indian Ocean strategy over the next ten to fifteen years, it is first useful to focus on some general development trends of sea power rather than speculation about China's intentions.

The Dominance of Sea Denial

Today, we are living in a period of sea-denial dominance. Because maritime hegemony is so expensive to gain and sustain in the 21st century, no powers, including the United States and China, can have the capacity and bear the cost. Compared with sea control, sea denial is a much more realistic and cheaper goal. Definitions of sea control and sea denial vary according to different perspectives, and the two concepts are usually intertwined. Nonetheless, from a strategic perspective, we may define sea control as assuring one's own use of the sea and denying its use to the rivals in wartime. Sea denial, by contrast, can be defined as preventing adversaries from using the sea. Sea control means the desire to gain maritime dominance, whereas sea denial entails a balance of power. The 2020 version of the U.S. Navy's *Naval Doctrine Publication 1* defines sea denial as an "offensive, cost-imposing approach that can be applied when it is impossible or unnecessary to establish sea control."¹

Achieving sea control has always been more difficult than sea denial because the former is highly dependent on a country's capacity to project air and naval power, while the latter does not require massive power projection and intense joint operations. Moreover, today's task of sea control includes joint operations in all domains—land, sea, air, space,

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¹ U.S. Navy, *Naval Doctrine Publication 1: Naval Warfare* (Washington, D.C., 2020), 22.

and cyber—and the vulnerability of any domain may mean that the strategy fails. What makes sea denial different now from the past is the rapid improvement in sensor, guidance, and communication technology in recent decades and new ways of implementing strategies that such technology creates.² Therefore, states are increasingly able to threaten an opponent's ships at long range from relatively safer and cheaper land-based aircraft and missile batteries—a range of capabilities termed anti-access/area-denial by U.S. military planners.³

Thus, with heightened interdependence of great powers and multiple paths of military technology, maritime predominance is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, and perhaps will even be impossible in the future. However, for great powers, it is progressively simpler to ensure the other side's fleet cannot sail unhindered if needed. In this regard, most waters of the world are in the contested “no man's sea.”⁴ Usually, great powers enjoy an advantage in their near seas and must accept others' advantages elsewhere. The United States may be the only exception based on its status as a superpower and its alliance system. However, even the United States is finding it harder to maintain its edge, especially in the western Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Arctic.

China's Interests in the Indian Ocean

China is a power with a relatively unfavorable marine geography, and it has no formal military ally around the Indian Ocean. No matter how China rises, it would be difficult for the country to wield dominant sea power in the Indian Ocean region as long as the United States and India make no major strategic mistakes nor suffer a sharp decline in national power. In the Indian Ocean, China is confronted with a similar anti-access dilemma and the disadvantage of distance that the United States faces in East Asian waters. Therefore, China can only operate in the ocean as a relatively weak sea power, or perhaps by using a “fleet in being” strategy, which means maintaining an effective but inferior military presence so as to deter and

² Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,” *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016): 19.

³ Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, “Cruising for a Bruising: Maritime Competition in an Anti-Access Age,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (2020): 676.

⁴ Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, “Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect U.S. Allies in Asia,” *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019): 171–89.

check the stronger sea power from obtaining absolute command of the sea and violating its own vital interests.⁵

At present and for the foreseeable future, China's most important interest in the Indian Ocean is to maintain the openness and security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs). However, Beijing knows very well that the SLOCs depend greatly on the openness of the international system and cooperation with other powers, including the United States, India, and Australia.

"Far sea protection" is one of the two major missions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy.⁶ In recent years, the PLA Navy has strengthened its power projection and deployments in open seas as part of this mission. But so far, China's military capabilities outside the western Pacific remain inadequate to change its strategic weaknesses. Although its naval hardware is already very powerful, the military has not built credible deterrence as to great-power competition because of inadequate support from overseas bases and allies, which is unlikely to be improved substantially in the near term. In the Indian Ocean, China still has no credible military force or complete military system, despite having a base in Djibouti since 2017 and a naval escort task force in the Gulf of Aden since the end of 2008. Because of geographic disadvantages and limited geopolitical objectives, Beijing prefers a defensive and cooperative military policy in this area.

To a certain degree, China has accepted its strategic vulnerability in the waters outside the western Pacific. Instead, the country's rise has been built on the openness of the global system rather than on its navy, which is different from other rising powers in history. Thus, for the foreseeable future, China's SLOCs and overseas interests must be safeguarded through global cooperation, especially with great powers like the United States. In this regard, the United States is a partner, not a competitor, of China in most of the world's oceans and seas.

Undoubtedly, moves by the United States to step up great-power competition as well as to develop the Quad mechanism are heightening China's concerns about its maritime strategic environment. This could compel the country to improve its power presence and deterrence in the region and rethink its cooperative approach. However, provided the global

⁵ Arthur Herbert, *The Earl of Torrington's Speech to the House of Commons, in November, 1690* (London: Gale ECCO, 2010), 29.

⁶ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015) ~ http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2016-07/13/content_4768294.htm.

economic system remains open and Sino-U.S. peace can be kept, China would not choose to abandon its current path.

Beijing's main geopolitical center of gravity remains the western Pacific, which means it would not be too concerned about the changing balance of power in the Indian Ocean unless a military alliance had been formed against China in the region. The Belt and Road Initiative, with over one hundred countries involved, can only be economically focused. It is too large to be the linchpin of a military strategy.⁷ Of course, Beijing would prefer that there not be a hegemonic power like a possible U.S.-led alliance or super maritime India in the Indian Ocean, as a situation with checks and balances would be better for China's interests.

Managing Worst-Case Scenarios

In order to deal with worst-case scenarios, China may seek out quasi-allies and partners around the northern Indian Ocean. But in the next ten to fifteen years, this demand is unlikely to be great. Tactically, only if China's SLOCs or important overseas interests were severely undermined would China respond militarily. Therefore, to a great extent, Beijing's strategy in the Indian Ocean depends on what the United States and India choose to do.

In recent decades, China has made great progress in projecting power and extending its military presence in the Indian Ocean. But, as discussed above, China's capacity in this region is still limited. To be able to create a credible deterrent, it needs more support bases, a more powerful oceangoing fleet, and more experience in overseas deployments.

As to potential overseas bases, the valuable pivots in the Indian Ocean region are mainly located in the northern area. Thus, in addition, its naval base in Djibouti, China will likely focus on the possibility of similar collaborations with nations such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Cambodia. Only when China establishes another two or three support bases along the coast of the northern Indian Ocean will it be possible for the country to develop strong systematic capacity in the region. However, because China's overseas bases are established through negotiation rather than by waging war or by providing security protection, there remains great uncertainty in their layout and impact.

⁷ Hu Bo, "China in a Multipolar World," in *Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present*, ed. Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson (London: Routledge, 2020), 231.

All in all, in the next ten to fifteen years, Beijing will likely maintain its current cooperative approach in the Indian Ocean in the absence of any major incidents or changes in the balance of power. Unlike in China's near seas, Chinese military strategy and policy in the Indian Ocean will continue to be in a reactive and passive position. No big stimulus, no major change. ◆

Indian Ocean Futures: Implications for U.S. Strategy

Zack Cooper

What strategic futures are possible in the Indian Ocean and how will the United States' approach to the region shape and be shaped by these possibilities? By questioning some fundamental assumptions about the Indian Ocean's future, Arzan Tarapore and David Brewster have helped drive an important discussion. In particular, they have initiated a needed debate about the degree to which the United States can rely on its allies and partners in the region, and whether those allies and partners can themselves trust that Washington will devote sufficient attention and resources to the Indian Ocean region.

It is now common for U.S. leaders to state that the Indian Ocean is a priority for the United States.¹ The growing influence of the Quad, renaming of the Indo-Pacific Command, and adoption of an Asia strategy predicated on the Indo-Pacific concept demonstrate a broadening of the traditional U.S. focus on East Asia.² What these changes belie, however, is the reality that the United States will have to make some hard choices about prioritization in the years ahead and that, in these debates, the Indian Ocean is unlikely to come out on top.³ Rather than being a priority theater, the Indian Ocean could become an economy of force theater, particularly as the United States draws down forces in Afghanistan and perhaps also the Persian Gulf.

In short, the Indian Ocean may not be a top priority for Washington in the years ahead. Of course, the United States will still operate in the region and maintain diplomatic and economic ties with countries bordering

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¹ "U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region," Ministry of External Affairs (India), January 25, 2015 \approx https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24728/USIndia_Joint_Strategic_Vision_for_the_AsiaPacific_and_Indian_Ocean_Region.

² Dhruva Jaishankar and Tanvi Madan, "How the Quad Can Match the Hype," *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2021 \approx <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-15/how-quad-can-match-hype>.

³ Van Jackson, "America's Indo-Pacific Folly," *Foreign Affairs*, March 12, 2021 \approx <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-03-12/americas-indo-pacific-folly>.

the ocean.⁴ But U.S. leaders are unlikely to devote scarce defense resources to the region, particularly when military challenges farther east are growing more severe.⁵ As a result, a division of labor is likely to emerge in which Washington asks its allies and partners around the Indian Ocean to take on much of the burden so that the United States can focus elsewhere. The question remains, however, whether U.S. allies and partners will be willing and able to share that burden.

Questioning Assumptions

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of futures exercises is the ability to question assumptions that are too often implicit rather than explicit. In this regard, Brewster and Tarapore's scenarios should force a public debate about one key assumption: that the United States will devote substantial resources to the Indian Ocean region in the years ahead. This is not an argument about what the United States should do, but rather about what the United States will do. The strategic logic of a U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean is clear, but whether this accords with political realities and resource constraints is the critical issue at hand.

In recent years, there have been several arguments put forward about why the United States should increase the attention it pays to the Indian Ocean region. One popular line among military strategists is that the United States should look to compete with China in the Indian Ocean because the United States has a bigger advantage there than it does closer to China's coastline. In particular, some have suggested that the United States should threaten to conduct a peripheral blockade in the Indian Ocean to deter Chinese military adventurism in East Asia by imposing severe economic costs on China's economy.⁶

From a strategic standpoint, this makes some sense. The U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean region might force Beijing to devote substantial resources to a distant area where it has some inherent geographic disadvantages, thereby imposing a disproportionate cost on the People's

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, D.C., June 2019) ≈ <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/departement-of-defense-indo-pacific-strategy-report-2019.pdf>.

⁵ Kathleen Hicks, "Getting to Less: The Truth about Defense Spending," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020 ≈ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-02-10/getting-less>.

⁶ T.X. Hammes, "Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict," National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum, June 2012 ≈ <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-278.pdf>.

Liberation Army (PLA), particularly the PLA Navy.⁷ This approach could also trigger greater balancing by India, which would be threatened by a larger Chinese maritime presence in the Indian Ocean. As a result, some experts have suggested that the United States could avoid vertical escalation in East Asia by relying on the threat of horizontal escalation in the Indian Ocean.⁸

The reality, however, is that U.S. leaders are likely to see a peripheral campaign of this sort as a relatively unattractive fallback option.⁹ Policymakers in Washington worry that horizontal deterrence could fail to deter Beijing because it might work too slowly (if at all).¹⁰ As a result, advocates of this approach will struggle to attract the necessary resources, especially if U.S. leaders continue to focus more on deterrence by denial against an invasion of Taiwan.¹¹ Rather than a months-long blockade that would affect countries across the entire Indo-Pacific region, many American strategists believe that it would be more effective to maintain the capability to directly rebuff an invasion of Taiwan. This could be accomplished by sinking enough of China's fleet to either prevent an invasion from succeeding or render the endeavor unacceptably costly.¹²

Although peripheral operations in the Indian Ocean might still be useful as a cost-imposing strategy against Beijing, this is unlikely to drive major decisions in Washington. After all, the Biden administration has made clear that its chief military posture change will be to decrease the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, which means fewer U.S. forces transiting through the Indian Ocean.¹³ An administration looking for ways to cut the defense budget and increase U.S. presence in East Asia

⁷ Thomas G. Mahnken, "Cost-Imposing Strategies: A Brief Primer," Center for a New American Security, Maritime Strategy Series, November 2014 ~ https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS_Maritime4_Mahnken.pdf?mtime=20160906081628&focal=none.

⁸ Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 385–421.

⁹ Gabriel Collins, "A Maritime Oil Blockade Against China—Tactically Tempting but Strategically Flawed," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 2 (2018) ~ <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol71/iss2/6>.

¹⁰ Evan Braden Montgomery "Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 615–23.

¹¹ Elbridge Colby, "America Can Defend Taiwan," *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2021 ~ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-can-defend-taiwan-11611684038>.

¹² Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect U.S. Allies in Asia," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019): 171–89.

¹³ Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "How to Do More with Less in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2020 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-09-15/how-do-more-less-middle-east>.

will find it hard to make scarce resources available for operations in and around the Indian Ocean.¹⁴

Reassessing Options

From a U.S. perspective, the best outcome in the Indian Ocean would be joint efforts alongside India and Australia to maintain collective regional superiority without requiring the reallocation of scarce resources by the United States. After all, it is increasingly clear that the U.S. military will have to prioritize not only regionally but also subregionally. “Indo” may now come before “Pacific” in Indo-Pacific Command’s name, but the Pacific Ocean still comes well before the Indian Ocean in prioritization. Working with India and Australia (perhaps alongside some limited presence from Japan, France, and the United Kingdom) would help Washington minimize the military resources required in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁵

Yet, if China dramatically increases its presence in the Indian Ocean, then a steady-state commitment by the United States might not be sufficient to maintain a satisfactory military balance across the region. In this case, a potential fallback option would be greater reliance on other regional players—what has been referred to (often derogatively) as a “deputy sheriff” model. The logic of this approach is that the U.S. military might prioritize its presence in East Asia and ask India and/or Australia to take the lead in the Indian Ocean. No doubt, the United States would still need some presence in the region, but smaller and more episodic deployments might suffice rather than a large steady-state force.¹⁶

Brewster and Tarapore point out that it is unfortunately unclear whether India or Australia would be both willing and capable of taking on this role. India might be too preoccupied with building up its ground and air forces on the Sino-Indian border to field a sufficient navy for sustained operations across the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ Australia might also find itself stretched thin in

¹⁴ Sameer Lalwani and Heather Byrne, “Great Expectations: Asking Too Much of the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership,” *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2019): 41–64.

¹⁵ Satu Limaye, “Weighted West, Focused on the Indian Ocean and Cooperating across the Indo-Pacific: The Indian Navy’s New Maritime Strategy, Capabilities, and Diplomacy,” CNA, April 2017 ≈ https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DRM-2016-U-013939-Final2.pdf.

¹⁶ Abhijit Singh, “The U.S. Navy in the Indian Ocean: India’s ‘Goldilocks’ Dilemma,” *War on the Rocks*, May 11, 2021 ≈ <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/the-u-s-navy-in-the-indian-ocean-indias-goldilocks-dilemma>.

¹⁷ For a counterargument, see Darshana M. Baruah, “India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi’s Theater of Opportunity,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 30, 2020 ≈ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/india-in-indo-pacific-new-delhi-s-theater-of-opportunity-pub-82205>.

deciding between allocating resources to the Pacific or Indian Ocean. It is possible that both countries could view the Indian Ocean as a secondary military priority, particularly if they are confronted with serious domestic constraints or extraregional security challenges.

What would happen if China increased its military presence in the Indian Ocean but both India and Australia were unable to meet that challenge?¹⁸ In this circumstance, it is possible that the United States could effectively choose to withdraw its military forces from the Indian Ocean region and refocus on East Asia. Resource constraints imposed by an ongoing conflict or domestic challenges would make this more likely. But another impetus could be uncertainty about Diego Garcia, where diplomatic issues could force a reassessment of the costs, benefits, and sustainability of the United States' presence.¹⁹

This might seem unlikely to observers, particularly given that the United States has recently promised to build a new fleet for the Indian Ocean. But the First Fleet concept appears to be losing steam, and if no friendly country is taking a leading role in the region, how would officials in Washington convince politicians to increase resources devoted to the Indian Ocean? After all, as U.S. leaders consider the implications of greater energy independence, they are looking to downsize the U.S. presence in the Middle East, which could leave the Indian Ocean looking more like a secondary theater (such as Africa or Latin America) than a primary theater (such as Europe or East Asia).

Policy Implications

These scenarios remind us that the United States is not likely to make the Indian Ocean a priority theater in the years ahead. Instead, Washington will hope that it can avoid devoting more resources to the region, which might be possible if Beijing chooses not to do so itself. Regardless, the United States is likely to look for ways to devolve some regional responsibilities to India, Australia, and others. If these partners are unable or unwilling to take up these burdens, then leaders in Washington will face a difficult set of decisions.

¹⁸ T.V. Paul, "How India Will React to the Rise of China: The Soft-Balancing Strategy Reconsidered," *War on the Rocks*, September 17, 2018 ~ <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/india-and-the-rise-of-china-soft-balancing-strategy-reconsidered>.

¹⁹ Blake Herzinger, "The Power of Example: America's Presence in Diego Garcia," *Lowy Institute, Interpreter*, February 15, 2021 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/power-example-american-presence-diego-garcia>.

The easiest way for U.S. allies and partners to avoid this scenario would be to convince the United States that the costs of maintaining a presence in the Indian Ocean are relatively low. Providing a long-term solution to the diplomatic situation with Diego Garcia would be one way to do this. Another would be to expand the number of easily accessible operating locations, potentially including India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands or Australia's Cocos Islands.²⁰ There are political and logistical challenges with gaining greater access to these and other locations (such as Darwin and Perth), but a concerted effort might overcome some of these barriers.²¹

Decreasing the challenges to operating from these facilities is one of the few ways that leaders in New Delhi or Canberra have to incentivize continued U.S. military engagement in the Indian Ocean. This is not to suggest that making it easier for U.S. forces to operate in the region would solve the larger resource trade-offs discussed here, but it might decrease the barriers to entry and thereby make a continued U.S. presence more likely. Nonetheless, observers should realize that the Indian Ocean is likely to be a secondary theater for the United States in the years ahead. Changing the Indo-Pacific Command's name was an important signal, but changing the U.S. military's underlying geostrategic thinking is a much more difficult challenge. ♦

²⁰ Abhijit Singh, "Militarising Andamans: The Costs and the Benefits," *Hindustan Times*, July 29, 2020
 ~ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/militarising-andamans-the-costs-and-the-benefits/story-J3mGWFQS3NgLUiPYwIVb2N.html>.

²¹ Samuel Bashfield, "Australia's Cocos Islands Cannot Replace America's Troubled Diego Garcia," *Diplomat*, April 16, 2019 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/australias-cocos-islands-cannot-replace-americas-troubled-diego-garcia>.

Keeping China Out, the United States In, and Pakistan Down: India's Strategy for the Indian Ocean Region

Rohan Mukherjee

India is a rising power with significant gaps in the translation of its economic potential into military power—gaps that may considerably widen due to the severe damage being wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic on India's economy and society. At a time when military spending relative to GDP has been declining for over a decade and personnel costs have until recently been rising at the expense of capital expenditures, the three scenarios in this exercise starkly demonstrate some of the external challenges that Indian policymakers might face in coming years. These challenges are all the more dangerous in a period when India, weakened by the pandemic, may be seen as an easier target and may itself respond aggressively to provocations for reasons of domestic or international reputation. Given these parameters, the scenarios highlight three important dimensions in which Indian thinking about the future of the Indian Ocean region will need to be flexible and sometimes run counter to dominant assumptions in New Delhi: capabilities, resolve, and partnerships.

If India faced a benign security environment, its domestic weaknesses would be less pernicious and the state would have a longer runway to build itself into a major world power. In fact, the opposite is true. The scenarios highlight two major external trends that must factor into India's strategic calculus: the relative decline in U.S. capabilities and interests in the Indian Ocean, and the relative increase in Chinese capabilities and interests in this region. Both of these factors eliminate the luxury of time and increase the pressure on India to make resource allocations and political choices suited to a range of near-term potential crises and geopolitical ruptures. On the one hand, India will need to enlarge its naval footprint in the Indian Ocean region to make up for a longer-term decline in U.S. presence. On the other hand, India will need to prepare for the full spectrum of challenges from China's expansion into this region, including adventurism along the Sino-Indian border, an increased People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy presence in the Indian Ocean, deepening relationships between

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China and Indian Ocean states, and even cyber intrusions and attacks on Indian infrastructure.

India's Capabilities

First, India's own capabilities will make a crucial difference to regional outcomes. This is not simply a matter of expenditure, which of course will matter, but also one of allocation. It is in China's interest to keep India tied down on its land frontiers and obsessed with the possibility of a two-front war. The working assumption of most Indian policy and defense planners is that India's major military engagements in the coming decades will be along the contested borders with Pakistan and China, respectively—an assumption further validated by the ongoing Sino-Indian standoff in Ladakh. The scenarios suggest, however, that ignoring sea power would be a grave mistake. In the extreme case of India continuing with its current naval strength without augmentation, the best the Indian Navy can do is provide coastal defense. Its existing resources are radically inadequate for sea denial—which the Indian Navy views as “an offensive measure, to reduce the adversary's freedom of action and to degrade his operations”—let alone sea control.¹

India has hitherto benefited from the U.S. Navy's command of the seas in the Indian Ocean region. The U.S. Navy's ability to ensure freedom of navigation, protect maritime chokepoints, and slow the pace of China's maritime expansion into the region has allowed India to gradually develop its own naval capabilities and doctrine while devoting sufficient resources to countering land-based threats. A future scenario in which the United States withdraws from Diego Garcia or China takes hostile action against regional countries such as Indonesia would place considerable demands on the Indian Navy to assume a substantial share of the tasks fulfilled by the U.S. Navy today. To plan for such a role, Indian decision-makers will need to rethink the dominance of the army among the services or at least prioritize naval modernization and acquisition at a rate that can enable sea denial in the northern Indian Ocean.

India's Resolve

The second dimension highlighted by the scenarios is the role of Indian resolve and risk-taking. India has traditionally been a status quo actor that has used force for defensive ends. This tendency was most pronounced in


¹ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi, October 2015), 72.

the two decades after the Cold War, when India developed from a country that occasionally intervenes militarily in regional affairs into a sovereignty hawk that eschews force in most circumstances (except outright war). This equilibrium has once again shifted with the arrival of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the national scene. India under Modi has displayed a willingness to both manipulate risk and use calibrated force. The country mobilized troops in response to Chinese activity in border areas such as Doklam in 2017 and Ladakh in 2020, as well as taking potentially escalatory actions in retaliation against Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attacks at Uri in 2016 and Pulwama in 2019.² India's signaling of resolve has arguably hit home. It is telling, for example, that official Chinese discourse has revived the old trope of India being a U.S. puppet, which was the Chinese Communist Party's view of India during the historical peak of Sino-Indian tensions in the 1960s and early 1970s.

While India seems more willing to take bold action to defend its interests, this pattern of behavior risks creating feedback loops of escalation over time in an environment of rising domestic nationalism. Put simply, successful retaliation in one crisis creates domestic pressure to equal or exceed expectations of a repeat performance in the next crisis—and there will be no shortage of crises. The scenarios highlight the dangers of going too far in the process of reducing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region. For example, there is an underlying sense in the Indian establishment that the threat of force will always exist as a last resort to bring other South Asian states into line if they stray too close to Beijing. However, as the scenario involving Maldives highlights, India might create significant dangers for itself by pursuing this logic in the extreme and setting down red lines such that force becomes the first resort. Changing India's military strategy from retaliation to prevention would not only alienate key regional states, it would also create friction in India's relations with external partners such as the United States, France, and Japan, which would be unwilling to endorse Indian preventive coercion of smaller states as a means of countering China.

India's Partnerships

Across all scenarios, India's strategic partnerships with various Indian Ocean countries and external powers will have a significant impact on its


² Pia Krishnankutty, "Under Modi, India More Likely to Respond to Pakistan Provocation with Military Force: U.S. Intel," *Print*, April 14, 2021  <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/under-modi-india-more-likely-to-respond-to-pakistan-provocation-with-military-force-us-intel/639670>.

future options. There are four ways in which partnerships will matter. First, if India is to place limits on China's expansion, New Delhi must at least begin with the eastern Indian Ocean region and maintain robust ties with states such as Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Maldives in order to increase the benefits to them of choosing India as a guarantor of maritime security and regional order.

Second, if India is to fill the gaps created by a declining U.S. presence at Diego Garcia, then political and economic relations with states in the western Indian Ocean region will be integral to maintaining regional order and security. Pakistan would need to be convinced to not act as a spoiler, and states more sympathetic to India such as Afghanistan, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Mauritius could share in the cost of increasing maritime awareness, conducting antipiracy efforts, and securing sea lanes. India could improve relations with states in the Horn of Africa to this end. Whether countering China or replacing the United States, deep economic and political engagement not only benefits both parties—that is, India and other states—but also reduces the cost of maintaining regional influence. Coercion, after all, is costly and counterproductive in that it will drive states further into China's orbit. Instead, building political coalitions in the Indian Ocean region can help create a consensus in favor of regional stability. This would in turn create collective pressure on any state that acts disruptively, as China might do in trying to bully Indonesia or buy out Maldives.

Third, India has much to gain from managing its partnership with Washington in a way that ensures some U.S. commitment to the Indian Ocean region, even in a future “West of Singapore” scenario. This partnership with the United States is mostly transactional, in that India benefits from U.S. defense cooperation and strategic coordination but ultimately prefers to manage disputes and crises with China unilaterally. Absent a treaty obligation, India is the least likely member of the recently rejuvenated Quad to possess the logistical ability and political will to assist fellow members (the United States, Japan, and Australia) in potential conflicts with China. Washington is not blind to this reality. Indeed, in a future scenario where the United States is forced to selectively retrench, hardly anyone in Washington will think twice about leaving India to manage the Indian Ocean region. To keep the United States committed so that India can have a longer path to developing its naval capabilities, New Delhi may well find it important to revisit its assumptions regarding the partnership. To this end, India could signal greater commitment to assisting the United States and its allies in potential future crises—for example, over Taiwan.

Finally, none of the above rules out some sort of accommodation between India and China, which would be a worst-case outcome of U.S. retrenchment in conjunction with Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean region. Given that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will last for years and that China has already emerged economically stronger than other powers in the Indo-Pacific, there may come a point when the material gap between China and India is so wide as to render insufficient any military or political resistance India can muster. India's current assumptions on this front are in flux. Although the Doklam crisis of 2017 was followed by the conciliatory Wuhan summit of 2018, as the Ladakh crisis has unfolded, India has stated that relations with China cannot return to business as usual so long as the PLA occupies disputed land along the border.³ This assumption may need to be revisited if the respective material trajectories of the two countries diverge even more than they already have over the last three decades and the United States is unable to maintain its presence in the region.

To borrow a transatlantic formulation, India's current strategy for the Indian Ocean region can be described as designed to keep China out, the United States in, and Pakistan down. The scenarios suggest that achieving the first two goals (and indirectly the third) will depend on the way India allocates its military resources, responds to escalatory pressures in crises, and manages partnerships with regional countries and external powers, especially the United States. 

³ Anirban Bhaumik, "Business Cannot Be as Usual with China Unless PLA Restores Status Quo: India," *Deccan Herald*, September 4, 2020.

From Deft Diplomacy to Rebalancing Hard Power: Australia and Indian Ocean Strategic Futures

Peter J. Dean

Australia is in a strategic age that is unprecedented in its history. Since the end of World War II, Australia has largely lived in an Indo-Pacific dominated by uncontested U.S. hegemony. This reality is no more. Before this period, Australian security was largely achieved through its participation in the British Empire that provided maritime dominance in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Since European colonization in 1788, Australia has been faced with only two major power shifts in the region that threatened British or U.S. maritime supremacy. The first was fleeting. In 1914, at the start of World War I, the German Navy's East Asia Squadron roamed the Pacific for a short time before being destroyed at the Battle of the Falkland Islands. The second, and more significant shift, was from the 1930s to 1945 with the rise of imperialist Japan and World War II.

Australia is now in a third such era of a changing balance of power. However, this time it looks fundamentally different. Once a strategic backwater in the Cold War, Australia now finds that its so-called tyranny of distance from the global centers of power and competition in Europe and the Middle East has been replaced by the power of proximity to the global geoeconomic center of gravity in the Indo-Pacific. Faced with a rising China and India, a United States in relative decline, and a rapidly evolving geostrategic landscape, Australia is having to readjust how it views and engages with the region while also dealing with its own relative decline.

Australia's response to the scenarios presented in the futures analysis presented here by Arzan Tarapore and David Brewster can be broken down into two types. The first type considers the need for deft diplomacy in response to a more illiberal India, whereas the second highlights the more strategically significant impacts of an Indian or U.S. retrenchment or withdrawal from the region.

An Illiberal India Challenging the Rules-Based Order

The emergence of a more illiberal India in the Indian Ocean is in many ways the less problematic scenario for Australia. This assessment is based

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on Australia's focus on preserving a balance of power in the Indian Ocean and its desire to ensure that the region is not dominated by an aggressive authoritarian China. This scenario, which is not predicated on a diminished role for the United States in the region, poses the challenge of balancing values and interests. To what extent does Australia conceive its relationship with India around support for the rules-based global order, and how much Indian presence in the Indian Ocean would be necessary to balance rising Chinese power? In this scenario, India's strong response to China conflicts with Australia's strong support for a rules-based global order.

This is not new territory for Australia. The country has always had to balance its support for the rules-based global order and its relationships with the great powers, especially its major alliance partners Great Britain and then the United States. This was evident in Australia's support for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, undertaken without a UN mandate and on the basis of dubious intelligence about weapons of mass destruction that proved to be false. This diplomatic balancing act between values and interests has been a core element of Australia's strategic diplomacy since the end of World War II, particularly during the Cold War. Ultimately, Australia has maintained its support for the rules-based global order, including calling out the illiberal behavior of its friends and allies, while taking a longer-term, pragmatic approach to bilateral relations and the regional balance of power.

A future scenario involving an illiberal India would thus present challenges to Australia's values and regional outlook. Although India-Australia relations and India's reputation internationally would be damaged, Australian pragmatism about the regional order and balance of power would ultimately prevail. As a result, such a scenario would not necessarily require Australian policymakers to radically reconsider their current assumptions as long as Australia's balance-of-power interests in the region were not adversely affected by an illiberal India such as this scenario outlines. The challenge here would be one of deft diplomacy to navigate through this scenario.

If India Steps Back

An Indian or U.S. retrenchment or withdrawal from the Indian Ocean would present far more challenges to Australia's current assumptions about the region and its core interests. In terms of scenario one—India stepping back from the Indian Ocean—as Euan Graham from the International Institute for Strategic Studies has recently noted, current “long-term U.S.

[and Australian] hopes are likely to remain pinned on India stepping up as hegemon in the Indian Ocean.”¹ A decline in India’s relative military power in the region would strain Australia’s limited resources and place even greater pressure on U.S. resources, which are already constrained by the United States’ relative power decline in the Indian Ocean, domestic political and economic conditions, and global commitments.²

In this scenario, Australia would have to address major strategic consequences of the loss of a significant maritime partner. Diplomatically, Canberra would have to deploy greater effort and energy in its soft power in the Indian Ocean—a capability that has been in atrophy for decades due to chronic government underfunding.³ Australia would also have to focus on strengthening regional institutions and broadening multilateral and minilateral groupings, as well as stepping up engagement with key partners in the Indian Ocean like Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. It would also have to look at enhancing cooperation with “extraregional” or geographically peripheral countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and other EU countries. The risk here is that Australia would need to expend major diplomatic effort and capital for potentially little material return.

Militarily, Australia would need to make strong moves to significantly increase the Royal Australian Navy’s presence in the Indian Ocean, as well as to make effective use of air and land power. Australia already bases half of its navy in the region, including its entire submarine fleet. Any increase in capability to Australia’s west would need to be coupled with a major increase in the infrastructure in Western Australia and the country’s Indian Ocean territories to support sustained military forces and operations. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) could refocus its force posture to the west, including the positioning of a high proportion of the army’s proposed long-range land-based strike assets on the west coast of Australia as well as forward deployments of these and other assets to Indian Ocean territories such as Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. In addition,

¹ Euan Graham, “Reposturing U.S. Defence to the Indo-Pacific,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2, 2021 ~ <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/03/reposturing-us-defence-to-the-indo-pacific>.

² See Van Jackson, “America’s Indo-Pacific Folly: Adding New Commitments in Asia Will Only Invite Disaster,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 20, 2021 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-03-12/americas-indo-pacific-folly>.

³ The 2020 budget did include a \$198 million boost to increase Australia’s diplomatic presence in the Indo-Pacific, but the details of this effort have yet to be made clear. See David Speers, “Australia’s Deteriorating China Relationship Had Silent Influence over Some Budget Priorities,” ABC (Australia), May 13, 2021 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-13/australia-china-relationship-silent-influence-over-budget/100134288>.

the ADF would need to re-posture air force assets to the west, especially maritime patrol aircraft (both manned and unmanned).

This scenario would bring to the fore a persistent issue in Australia's grand strategy—the tension between its interests in the Pacific Ocean (and especially the southwest Pacific) and those in the Indian Ocean. This is the reality of its two-ocean geography. A key question for Australian policymakers would be whether the country has the ability to persuade New Zealand to step up its engagement in the Pacific and to encourage greater U.S. involvement in the South Pacific. The first option is unlikely, and the second is also doubtful given the United States' declining relative power and more pressing U.S. strategic interests in East Asia and even the Indian Ocean.

As a self-described “middle power” with limited resources, Australia may well be forced to choose between its interests in each ocean in any scenario involving a reduction in Indian or U.S. resources from the Indian Ocean region. Alternatively, significant investment in additional military and diplomatic resources would be required if a two-ocean strategy proved persistent and the commitment to the Pacific Step-up was maintained. However, this would come at a significant financial cost and have an impact on domestic policy areas, further straining an Australian economy already buffeted by the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴

U.S. Withdrawal from the Indian Ocean

While problematic, the impact on Australia from scenario two is not as dire as the policy implications of a full U.S. withdrawal from the Indian Ocean. In this last scenario sketched by Tarapore and Brewster, Australia would be faced with all of the decisions outlined above along with a host of others. Specifically, the country would have to choose between its interests in the southwest Pacific and its western approaches—namely the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. Given the relative weight and scale of Australia's Indian Ocean interests, in terms of both their economic and strategic importance, the only thing that would constrain a predetermined choice to pivot to the Indian Ocean would be the cultural, historical, and emotional links for Australia to the South Pacific. The impact of such cultural and historical ties on strategy should not to be underestimated.

⁴ It should be noted here that Australia and South Korea are the only two developed nations to have their economies grow during this pandemic, but the long-term impact remains unclear.

The Australian Defence Strategic Update in 2020 called for the ADF to develop an independent deterrence effect and greater self-reliance.⁵ Given the centrality of the U.S.-Australia alliance to Australian foreign and defense policy, the United States' withdrawal from the Indian Ocean would require all the measures outlined above for scenario one, but with the additional burden of developing a rapid-response capability. One option would be to expedite expansion of bilateral military cooperation with India to ensure a favorable balance of power in the Indian Ocean. This could be difficult, given the slow pace of the bilateral defense and security relationship, but such a strategic future may well provide incentives to both sides given the critical role of U.S. power in the Indian Ocean at present and the military outcomes outlined in this scenario.

In addition, the potential threat of China closing the northern Indian Ocean to commercial traffic in this scenario would focus the ADF on the Indian Ocean and also on a higher tempo of operations. This would strain the ADF's ability to maintain its presence in the region and prepare for what could eventually involve kinetic operations. As with the first scenario, Australia would have to look at different multilateral and minilateral groups and at enhancing cooperation in extraregional or geographically peripheral countries such as the UK and France. The key question here is what, if any, military resources these partners might be able to provide.

All these measures would lead to increased spending on defense and security for Australia, but they also raise a series of key questions—particularly if a conflict with Taiwan were imminent—that would have to be asked, assessed, and answered. This is especially pertinent to the issue of what Australia's commitments would be under the U.S.-Australia alliance regarding the ADF's involvement in direct military operations around Taiwan. Would it be acceptable to U.S. commanders for Australia to concentrate the ADF in the Indian Ocean and thus not have major assets available in the South and East China Seas or the broader Pacific Ocean? The key issue here is a relative understanding over resource allocation. In this situation, what would the United States expect of Australia in the southwest Pacific and Indian Ocean compared with in Southeast Asia and East Asia more broadly? Moreover, would this sort of deal be both in Australia's interests and within its capabilities?

⁵ Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra, July 2020) ~ https://www1.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf; and Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Force Structure Plan* (Canberra, July 2020) ~ https://www1.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/2020_Force_Structure_Plan.pdf.

Conclusion

Each of these scenarios presents challenges for Australian policymakers and demands close assessment. What has been demonstrated over the last five years is how quickly the strategic environment can change. The most immediate question for Australia is whether it is appropriately balancing its strategic efforts between its two oceans. Given the fact that the current government has pulled resources from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to fund its Pacific Step-up initiative, which seems directly reactive to Chinese moves in the Pacific and the Indo-Pacific more broadly, the answer to this must be no.⁶ Without a rebalance of strategic focus and resources westward, Australia risks being caught unprepared to respond to future scenarios in the Indian Ocean that carry far greater strategic consequences than almost anything that could occur in the South Pacific. ♦

⁶ Hervé Lemahieu, “The Case for Australia to Step Up in Southeast Asia,” Brookings Institution, October 2020 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-case-for-australia-to-step-up-in-southeast-asia>.

Can Minilaterals Deliver a Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean?

Kate Sullivan de Estrada

The opening decades of the 21st century have made new demands of Asia's regional security landscape. Both China's rise and uncertainty over the security commitments of the United States in the region have fueled a resurgence of traditional security concerns. The national security interests of U.S. treaty allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia have grown more diverse, even as previously nonaligned states, especially India, increasingly value strategic partnership with the United States in the shape of military transfers, logistical access, and capacity building.¹ The same power transition that put first Asia and then the wider Indo-Pacific region at the center of world politics has driven demand for greater status parity among global and regional powers and an appetite for less hierarchical forms of diplomatic and security collaboration. Minilaterals, as small and flexible forms of closely networked cooperation, have addressed several of these challenges and hold promise—to some—as a bridge from the post-World War II bilateral alliance system of the United States to a new regional security order.²

Minilaterals: Tolerant of Diversity or Disguising Dissonance?

The advantages of minilaterals are several. On traditional security issues, they can function as multipliers of military and economic capabilities and accelerators of in-group exchange. At the same time, minilaterals are “diversity tolerant.” They permit relative policy autonomy among members because their agendas are flexible, ad hoc, and issue-focused, and they avoid the requirement that smaller powers

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¹ William T. Tow, “Minilateral Security’s Relevance to U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Prospects,” *Pacific Review* 32, no. 2 (2019): 232–44; and Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “Rise of the Minilaterals: Examining the India-France-Australia Trilateral,” *Diplomat*, September 17, 2020 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/rise-of-the-minilaterals-examining-the-india-france-australia-trilateral>.

² Michael J. Green, “Strategic Asian Triangles,” in *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, ed. Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 758–74.

doggedly serve the strategic goals of larger powers.³ They also reduce the risk of free-riding. Minilaterals can function as a site for the coordination of political dialogue outward and the sharing of intelligence inward and as a potential mechanism for the re-legitimation of global norms, such as those centered on maritime governance.⁴

Minilaterals can also, however, disguise dissonant agendas. In the Indian Ocean, for example, the U.S.-dominated Quad has an Indo-Pacific remit that seeks to fold India into a balancing coalition against China. Yet the stakes are somewhat higher for India as the only Quad member to share a land border—and a fractious one—with the Asian giant.⁵ Australia, Japan, and India share an interest in enmeshing the United States in the region, a drive that was particularly pronounced during the Trump administration.⁶ The priorities of three of the Quad members are concentrated in the Pacific, while India is more focused on the Indian Ocean region.⁷ A further area of dissonance is that the growing enthusiasm for the Quad—manifest most prominently in the group’s convening of its first leader-level summit in 2021—has not been matched by growing U.S., Japanese, and Australian commitments in the Indian Ocean.

This tacit asymmetry of security interests across the two “theaters” of the Indian and Pacific Oceans has so far worked for Quad members. Yet challenging scenarios such as those presented in this strategic futures exercise can quickly marginalize the balancing potential of ad hoc and informal minilaterals: their greatest virtue—flexibility—becomes their greatest weakness. Crisis situations put hard bipolarity and the potential for great-power conflict center stage, shifting the calculations of weaker, regional powers. Shifts in the internal politics of member states can remove or lessen the domestic bases of support for minilaterals—as exemplified by the first, short-lived incarnation of the Quad in 2007 and 2008 that fell afoul of changes in leadership in Japan and Australia. Other core minilaterals, such as the Australia-Japan-India, Australia-India-France, and Australia-India-Indonesia trilaterals, may prove less fragile as they are

³ Rajesh Basrur and Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, “Modi’s India and Japan: Nested Strategic Partnerships,” *International Politics* (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00288-2>.

⁴ *Ibid.*; Robert Falkner, “A Minilateral Solution for Global Climate Change? On Bargaining Efficiency, Club Benefits, and International Legitimacy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016): 87–101.

⁵ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, “India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad,” *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): 181–94.

⁶ H.D.P. Envall, “The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: Towards an Indo-Pacific Order?” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Policy Report, September 2019 <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/the-quadrilateral-security-dialogue-towards-an-indo-pacific-order>.

⁷ Roy-Chaudhury and Sullivan de Estrada, “India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.”

primarily forums of economic and political coordination. Yet without the participation of the United States, their balancing capacity vis-à-vis China is less meaningful.

The Performance of Minilaterals across the Three Scenarios

In scenario one of the strategic futures exercise (“Not India’s Ocean”), minilaterals, especially the Quad, would continue to matter for two reasons: legitimacy and influence. To maintain the trust and a spirit of shared regional ownership, and given India’s long-standing and difficult-to-reverse claims to primacy over the Indian Ocean, other Quad partners would likely seek India’s counsel on and endorsement of regional actions, if not its military input. Conversely, India would seek to leverage the Quad as a forum for continued political influence so as to retain a say in any actions in or adjacent to the Indian Ocean or to prevent unwanted actions in its “maritime backyard.”

Nonetheless, India could fall back on two tried and tested methods for retaining influence while eschewing military participation. The first of these is brokerage: New Delhi could seek to serve as a broker between the two sides of the conflict. This could, paradoxically, see India growing closer to China. The second is soft balancing: India may seek to mobilize a wider audience among the Indian Ocean littoral states and other interested countries—through multilateral forums and other minilateral groupings—with the aim of exerting collective pressure to reduce tensions. Here, India would deliver social and diplomatic value rather than material capabilities, putting the Quad’s flexible ethos to the test. This could strain the cohesion of a Quad narrowly defined as a balancing enterprise, yet enhance the capacity of a Quad conceived as a diversified forum for managing regional security crises.

Scenario two (“An Illiberal International Order”) is—to this author—the least credible of the three scenarios. A more plausible framing could see a recently ousted government in Maldives challenging the new, incumbent government and its acceptance of Chinese technical aid (a prelude to irreversible dependency). The ousted government would request Indian assistance to restore its rule. India would use its sophisticated diplomatic machinery at the international and regional levels to package its presence in Maldives in a normatively palatable way. This would not be unlike New Delhi’s marshaling of a self-defense rationale in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war

because humanitarian arguments were yet to emerge as normatively salient.⁸ India's enduring narrative that every regional intervention to date has been in response to a local "invitation" (real or rhetorical) seems unlikely to change.

The rhetorical defense of these actions would be of critical importance because of the audience logics of India's Indian Ocean followership—the littoral states of the region that New Delhi seeks to lead in a manner that is "consultative, democratic and equitable."⁹ Non-Indian members of the region's minilaterals may step up their engagement through these forums in an attempt to seek behind-the-scenes influence with a view to reining India in. New Delhi may seek to leverage the uptick in engagement through minilaterals to project external legitimation of its actions.

In scenario three ("The United States' West of Singapore Moment"), regardless of the direction of British policy, Mauritius may well welcome the continued presence of U.S. basing on Diego Garcia—either because the alternatives look far worse or because there would be powerful inducements to do so, perhaps from India. Could the reason for U.S. departure instead simply be disinvestment in the region at an opportune moment of flux? This is the scenario in which India will be keenest to push for a more proactive regional security architecture. Likely partners could include France and, perhaps paradoxically, the United Kingdom—countries that share both basing facilities and interests in the western Indian Ocean. Minilaterals will become more salient and important for India as balancing mechanisms at the same moment as they become more costly and burdensome to others.

Unless the United States and its allies on the UN Security Council, the UK and France, have completely given up on a rules-based international order or any semblance of international crisis management, it seems very unlikely that a nuclear-armed India would be left to fight a war with a nuclear-armed China alone. Australia, even if facing challenges in Southeast Asia and the southwest Pacific, could hardly afford to ignore the risks that Chinese control of Indian Ocean waters would pose to its dependence on trade and security across that maritime span.¹⁰

⁸ Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁹ Kate Sullivan de Estrada, "Putting the SAGAR Vision to the Test," *Hindu*, April 22, 2020 ~ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/putting-the-sagar-vision-to-the-test/article31399219.ece>.

¹⁰ David Brewster, "Australia's Second Sea: Facing Our Multipolar Future in the Indian Ocean," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Special Report, March 19, 2019.

In all scenarios, will any of the aforementioned minilaterals manifest as a regional security architecture in the Indian Ocean? What we are likely to see are various manifestations of India going it alone while seeking to leverage minilaterals to gain influence and legitimacy—and in scenario three, to conjure emergency military assistance. In all three scenarios, we also cannot rule out rapprochement between India and China as a least-worst option, and the necessary corollary of a demotion of the significance of minilaterals as security responses to Chinese dominance, at least for India.

The Social Purposes of Minilaterals

While minilaterals generate attention for their potential to deliver a security architecture, their broader “social purposes” are typically underplayed in analyses. The above account addresses this neglect. Appreciating the value of the social purposes of minilaterals guards against exaggerating their narrow balancing potential. It also permits a more nuanced set of prognoses about what they can tangibly deliver. Internally, minilaterals permit the building of trust, the convergence of policy agendas and perhaps also values, and steps toward mutual accountability. Externally, they can deliver greater legitimacy through the regional distribution of public goods, enhance the status and influence of less powerful members, and reinforce international norms.

Minilaterals may promise opportunities for security collaboration, but they cannot operate outside their wider international context. Global institutions and the arbiters of power that work through (and sometimes outside) them remain of primary consequence. Minilaterals may seek to patch over long-standing material and social asymmetries, but they mask rather than eschew power imbalances within world politics writ large. ♦

Small-State Responses to Strategic Dynamics in the Indian Ocean

Caitlin Byrne

The Indian Ocean is a vast and dynamic domain. Yet, much like its Pacific counterpart, it is too easily cast as a great emptiness, and too frequently the strategic dynamics shaping it are underestimated and underexamined.¹ By drawing us to consider major/minor trends and their implications for the decades ahead, this activity encourages more creative and critical engagement in the possible and alternative futures of the Indian Ocean—with particular attention to the primacy of India and the supporting role of the United States.

The scenarios presented in this roundtable highlight the complex dynamics at play, bring key vulnerabilities to the fore, and expose blind spots in strategic policy thinking. In particular, while conventional wisdom suggests that the great powers are jostling for power and influence in the Indian Ocean region, these scenarios also raise the interesting opposite problem: What happens if traditionally powerful states like India and the United States retrench from the region? This essay draws attention to three influential dynamics that might emerge: (1) the potential for a power vacuum in the Indian Ocean, (2) the evolving agency of littoral and island states, and (3) the need to sustain strategic Indo-Pacific partnerships. Each of these themes is discussed in turn, followed by a brief discussion of the potential implications for Australia.

A Power Vacuum in the Indian Ocean

To begin, it is worth restating the significance of India's evolving leadership role in the Indian Ocean, bolstered by the presence of strategic partners, notably the United States. As Arzan Tarapore has observed, "India remains the most consequential strategic actor in the Indian Ocean region,

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¹ Former U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo's suggestion that the United States and Australia as neighbors were "united rather than divided by the vast emptiness of Pacific waters" clearly rankled Pacific leaders. See Nic McClellan, "The Americans Are Coming," *Inside Story*, April 15, 2021.

by virtue of its geographic centrality, economic and military power, and abiding networks of influence across the region.”² Should India pull away from playing such a consequential role, the resultant power vacuum would see “stepped up maneuvering” from a range of states seeking to fill it.³

India’s past trajectory reveals the nation’s tendency to distraction alongside an ambivalent (or at least complacent) assumption of regional leadership, including in the maritime domain.⁴ With no shortage of potential distractions—whether arising from internal crises, political divisions, or external border hostilities—India could well turn its interest and investment away from the Indo-Pacific toward continental concerns.

Of course, no single actor would be as well-positioned to replace India’s significant position in the Indian Ocean. China makes for an obvious protagonist, with a significant presence in the region already and a growing influence throughout the Indian Ocean littoral among small island states. But it is not the only actor with aspirations for this ocean. Drawing on the rhetoric of “old friendship” and “joint engagement,” others, including Russia and Iran, may well seek to take advantage of a preoccupied India to enhance their own strategic presence in the maritime domain. Not to be left behind, European powers, including France and Germany, would look to ramp up their engagement to ensure that all-important maritime transit lines remain unimpeded in the emerging contest for hegemony in the ocean.

Quite separate to the challenge posed by state actors jostling for position in an Indian Ocean power vacuum is the potential for the proliferation of violent nonstate actors. With a plethora of activities ranging from piracy to terrorism to transnational crime to illegal fishing, these actors would jeopardize the security of the maritime domain, bringing serious implications for the littoral and island states. Overall, the result would likely be a further contest that destabilizes Indian Ocean strategic dynamics into the longer term.

² Arzan Tarapore, “Building Strategic Leverage in the Indian Ocean,” *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2020): 229.

³ Similar concerns were raised when the British announced their intention to withdraw from the Indian Ocean in 1968. See Don Oberdorfer, “Superpowers Jockeying to Fill Power Vacuum in the Indian Ocean,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 1977.

⁴ Darshana M. Baruah and Yogesh Joshi, “India’s Policy on Diego Garcia and Its Quest for Security in the Indian Ocean,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 1 (2021): 35–59.

The Significance of Indian Ocean Littoral and Island States

Cultivating the favorable disposition of littoral and island nations states has been a central component of India's regional statecraft. Yet, as Darshana Baruah and Yogesh Joshi have noted, in the absence of any significant competition, "India ignored and often took for granted its relationship with its maritime neighbors."⁵ Should India's attention lapse further, the interests and agency of littoral and island states may prove influential in setting the regional agenda.

China has already been active in cultivating influence across the small island states of the region, targeting states such as Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius with lucrative infrastructure, economic, and cultural offerings. Although yielding uneven success to date, these activities provide a foundation from which China could exert significant influence on Indian Ocean issues, while marginalizing others, especially India, in the process.

The small island states of the Indian Ocean are not passive bystanders. They bring their own difficult histories, complex identities, regional associations, and future aspirations to the table.⁶ It should also be expected that they will seek to advance their own interests, exercising agency and exploiting their increasingly strategic position in the region in the process. While not yet having established the same kind of collective diplomatic clout as Pacific Island nations, Indian Ocean island states are well placed to act collectively in multilateral forums to advance their shared interests.

Territorial claims to Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago provide a case in point. As the Mauritian claim for sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory gains traction and support within the international community, the archipelago is likely to become symbolic of the broader ambitions of island states and their pursuit of agency.

Currently a British territory home to a U.S. military base, Diego Garcia offers a strategic Indo-Pacific asset. But with increasing contestation from within the region, ongoing support for the United States' presence is not assured. India's currently ambiguous position, in which support for Mauritian sovereignty (and more broadly moral support for processes of decolonization) is balanced with support for the British and U.S. presence, will be untenable over the long term. By contrast, China's unsurprisingly

⁵ Baruah and Joshi, "India's Policy," 43.

⁶ Derek McDougall, "Sino-Indian Competition in the Indian Ocean Island Countries: The Scope for Small Island Agency," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 16, no. 2 (2020): 125.

unambiguous support for Mauritian sovereignty is viewed favorably by small states in the region and could tip the balance of support from Indian Ocean island states toward China, with long-term implications for regional order.

Strategic Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

The evolving strategic partnership that exists between India, the United States, Australia, and Japan as members of the Quad is based on a common underlying commitment to secure a free and open Indo-Pacific. Largely motivated by a mission to counterbalance China's increasing assertion of power and influence, the quartet reflects a broadly shared interest in preserving and protecting a liberal international rules-based order within the region.

The credibility of the narrative is underpinned by the extent to which the four partners commit to the region through their visible presence and the degree to which they each adhere to or contravene the rules-based order that they jointly support. Any waver or deviation—including as the result of withdrawal from the region (as scenarios one and three suggest)—will test the durability of the Indo-Pacific concept itself.

Consideration of the implications of various scenarios for the Indian Ocean region underscores the need for expanding the nature of like-minded Indo-Pacific partnerships, both within the Quad grouping and beyond. A Quad Plus approach, which might engage others with existing connections and interests in the ocean, offers value. With existing interests in the Indian Ocean maritime domain, France, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, alongside Southeast Asian partners such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia, could play a constructive role in such a cooperative Quad Plus framework.

Regardless, greater investment in multidimensional traditional and public diplomacy will be required to secure the ongoing commitment of Quad partners, especially India and the United States, while also shoring up key strategic partnerships and strengthening necessary architecture to manage and enforce international rules and regulations.

Implications for Australia

For Australia, any disruption to Indo-Pacific dynamics brings further challenges as the nation reorients its political discourse, diplomatic and military effort, and public support toward the protection of the maritime

domain to its west. Scenarios one and three, forecasting withdrawal by India and the United States respectively, are perhaps the most dire.

In both cases, it is not clear that Australia's capabilities in the immediate, medium, or long term would be fit for a larger Indian Ocean presence and role, or whether Australia would want to take on the political burden that such a larger role would require. With initial vulnerabilities exposed in the northern Indian Ocean, Australia might look to shore up its presence in the Cocos/Keeling Islands and Christmas Island. However, further pressure to monitor access to the Antarctic via the Southern Ocean gateway will place an increased burden on the nation, creating the case for a more significant military presence on the western seaboard.

Diplomatically, Australia must consider the implications of any gravitational pull to the west, including an increased focus on small island states, territories, and emergent or informal institutions across the Indian Ocean. Greater attention to the preferences of Eastern African states would also play a role in expanded diplomatic efforts. Yet any reorientation toward the west could compromise existing capabilities, credibility, and trust that has been built up over recent years elsewhere, especially in Australia's near Pacific neighborhood. Pacific Island nations will pay close attention, and any lapse in or diminished commitment to the Pacific Step-up initiative will drive some states closer to China as a preferred strategic partner.

For Australia, the dual burden of significant military engagements toward both west and east creates a capacity conundrum with both immediate- and longer-term political, diplomatic, and strategic implications. Against this backdrop, the domestic political environment is likely to become turbulent. Domestic audiences, fatigued by the health and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing disruption to global supply chains, will be reluctant to support upsizing diplomatic or military investments or engaging in potential confrontations without any convincing justification.

New anxieties about the world could spark a return to the "populate or perish" arguments of old, prompting a major reassessment of Australia's immigration and settlement strategies, with an emphasis on building the population along the Western coastline. At the same time, nationalist and xenophobic political forces are urging Australia to rebuild its sovereign capacities and retreat from global and regional engagement altogether. The narrative of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" will have little impact if domestic audiences are overcome with anxiety about the outside world.

The possibility that India or the United States might withdraw from their longstanding engagement in the Indian Ocean is rarely contemplated. Yet the impact on regional dynamics would be significant, with long-term implications for Australia's international policy and positioning. In short, Australia might consider what is required now to ensure that the necessary leadership capacities, resilient and integrated policy mechanisms, and informed public audiences are in place to safeguard against any internal and external volatility that might arise from the Indian Ocean's uncertain future. ◆

Conclusion: Strategic Policy in the Indian Ocean Region

Arzan Tarapore

As the United States and China compete for primacy in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean remains largely free of heavily militarized disputes comparable to those in the western Pacific Ocean that could flare into war. As a result, policymakers in Washington, Canberra, and other like-minded capitals have pursued approaches to an Indian Ocean defined by relatively low strategic risk. They expect that over the long term a steadily rising India, supported by an engaged United States and other partners, will be able to manage the challenge posed by China's growing influence. In other words, these states assume stable strategic preferences among the major powers and a largely favorable balance of power in the Indian Ocean. As this alternative futures project has illustrated, however, those assumptions are contestable, and plausible disruptive scenarios would carry enormous security implications for all concerned actors.

If existing assumptions are disputable, how can strategic policy hedge against them? The various contributions to this roundtable have revealed a wide range of policy concerns arising from the future scenarios—but several common themes have also emerged. For example, the prospect of a closer U.S.-India partnership in the Indian Ocean may be a key driver of a more assertive Chinese presence, but it may also be an important bulwark against Chinese influence. Either way, multiple contributors regarded such strategic partnerships as a particularly consequential variable in future policy settings.

This concluding essay outlines five key findings of this alternative futures project, synthesized from the scenarios and the roundtable discussion of policy implications. Together, they represent a checklist of sorts—considerations that policymakers in Washington, Canberra, and like-minded capitals should deliberately and explicitly weigh to maximize the effectiveness and resilience of strategic policy toward the Indian Ocean region.

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Understand the Relative—and the Absolute—Importance of the Indian Ocean

For all the major security actors in the Indian Ocean region, the ocean has traditionally been of secondary importance, as they face greater or more urgent threats elsewhere. As the scenarios showed, this is certainly true of India, which has always devoted a far greater share of defense resources to managing continental threats from Pakistan and China. It is also true of Australia, which traditionally prioritizes the adjacent areas of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, although its *2020 Defence Strategic Update* did reconceptualize the country's immediate region to include the “northeast Indian Ocean.”¹ As Zack Cooper argues in this roundtable, this is also true of the United States, which—despite its newfound focus on the expanded contiguous region of the Indo-Pacific—recognizes that the first and second island chains in the western Pacific must dominate its military planning. And as Hu Bo argues in this roundtable, this is true of China, which similarly regards its adjacent waters as its area of primary strategic interest.

This recognition carries several policy implications. First, secondary importance is not the same as negligible importance. For all these states, the Indian Ocean is home to critical energy and trade routes. The security of sea lanes, if nothing else, demands a certain minimum level of strategic attention. Second, given those interests, regional states should creatively search for cost-effective policy instruments to build and maintain influence, rather than basing plans on unrealistic expectations of lavish future resource allocations. Third, the relative importance of the Indian Ocean may rise if there is a sudden shift in the balance of power—especially if the United States sharply reduces its presence or China accelerates its expansion. In that case, the Indian Ocean will assume added strategic salience. Regional states such as India, Australia, and their partners will accordingly face a sharper dilemma between competing strategic priorities. If history is any guide, they will only reluctantly and belatedly adjust their policies in the wake of reduced U.S. commitments.

Manage Ongoing Uncertainty about Chinese Plans

The rapid expansion of Chinese military interests and capabilities has brought with it uncertainty over China's future plans. In just a decade, China went from having a negligible expeditionary capability to maintaining a

¹ Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra, July 2020), 6.

permanent naval task force and establishing its first overseas military base on the Indian Ocean rim.

What will the next decade bring? Current trends in naval shipbuilding and official doctrinal texts suggest that China plans to continue expanding its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. But as Hu argues, the shape and pace of that expansion are contingent on a number of factors. He pointedly warns that U.S., Indian, and like-minded states' policies will be a chief determinant of China's strategic approach. And as Caitlin Byrne argues in this roundtable, China probably stands to gain an advantage from any reduction in U.S. or Indian strategic influence. But China's record in securing influence is also mixed, and small regional states retain significant agency in exploiting strategic competition and forging their own partnerships.

Policymakers and planners in the United States, India, and Australia thus must decide how elastically they should respond to China's expansion. Given resource scarcity and other priorities, these states may be tempted to craft a relatively inelastic response that counts on their existing military presence and political influence, as well as on Chinese assurances of modest and benign intentions, to calculate that a muted strategic policy will suffice. Or, suddenly seized of the strategic risk of Chinese expansion, they may conclude that they have no choice but to redouble their military posture and aggressively campaign for regional influence. Either response must be cognizant of the associated risks—an overly sanguine policy may inadvertently cede influence, while an overly militarized policy in the Indian Ocean may inadvertently provoke a more frantic Chinese expansion.

Clarify the Goals of Policy

Recent policy statements across many countries have declared their objective of promoting a “free and open Indo-Pacific” or variations thereof. By casting China as a revisionist that is challenging the U.S.-sponsored international order, proponents of this norms-centered formulation have implied that the liberal international order is essentially synonymous with a favorable balance of power against China. In fact, as scenario two (“An Illiberal International Order”) showed, defending norms may come at the expense of the balance of power, and vice versa. As Peter J. Dean illustrates in his roundtable essay, this dilemma is particularly acute for middle powers such as Australia, which places the importance of values prominently in

its diplomacy. Canberra and others may face invidious trade-offs between defending interests and promoting values.

Over time, policymakers will increasingly be compelled to make decisions on issues that today remain hypothetical quandaries. The Quad, for example, bills itself as a collective of like-minded democracies, but in the future how willingly will it work with nondemocracies for the sake of counterbalancing Chinese influence? Indeed, what may be the impact of Quad members themselves suffering democratic backsliding? Similarly, as China's presence in the Indian Ocean grows, like-minded partners will need to distinguish between Chinese activities that are benign, those that are possibly risky to regional stability, and those that are genuine threats. This clarity on the goals of policy is necessary in part for political reasons—a consistent and transparent policy approach is more likely to win regional influence than a series of nakedly opportunistic actions. The clarity is also important for pragmatic reasons—*ex ante* determinations of what Chinese actions are acceptable or unacceptable will encourage policymakers to allocate scarce resource to only the most troublesome security problems.

Tailor the Use of Military and Nonmilitary Tools

Given the absence of highly militarized territorial disputes and the prevalence of nontraditional security threats in the Indian Ocean, policymakers should carefully calibrate their toolkits. At the extreme, some analysts suggest that the United States or India could gain leverage over China by threatening its sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean. More generally, even if a robust military buildup were feasible—which is questionable—it would not be sufficient to manage the region's security risks. It may even be counterproductive. The strategic challenges posed by China's expansion are not all readily addressed with conventional military capabilities.

Nonconventional security policies, spanning from military training to law-enforcement assistance, for example, are likely to be more effective and cost less. Further, some strategic priorities in the Indian Ocean are wholly unrelated to China. Many regional states, for example, are primarily concerned by the threats associated with climate change. Nontraditional security challenges, ranging from gray-zone coercion to dwindling fish stocks, require a whole-of-government response in which military activities play only a supporting role. If the United States, Australia, and like-minded partners seek to manage regional security, as well as gain an advantage in

strategic competition with China, they should be sensitive to local states' priorities and support them in building resilience against the risks that these states face.

Conventional military capabilities are necessary, but they too must be tailored for strategic effect. An undue emphasis on procuring or deploying large and highly visible prestige platforms may have unintended effects. Quite apart from burdensome costs, a general militarization of the Indian Ocean could raise regional suspicions or accelerate China's military expansion. Further, Hu argues in this roundtable that the presence of several capable navies in the region, armed with precision standoff weapons, renders strategies for achieving sea control untenable. The navies of the United States, India, Australia, and others are still doctrinally committed to seeking sea control. However, they should not pursue a force posture in the Indian Ocean that neglects relatively cheaper sea-denial capabilities, including shore-based and air-launched missiles.

Be Flexible on the Shape and Purpose of Partnerships

Given the scale and complexity of possible strategic risks in the Indian Ocean, policymakers in Washington, New Delhi, Canberra, and like-minded capitals have no choice but to rely on security partnerships. New informal minilateral groupings among the major actors—from the headline-grabbing Quad to nascent ones such as the Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral—have become commonplace in the Indo-Pacific. They at a minimum enable strategic policy coordination among partners and, more ambitiously, may allow partners to pool complementary resources, as in the Quad's vaccine initiative. Critically, however, even loose minilaterals can serve to signal political commitments to partners and possibly limit the political influence of rivals. For example, in Rohan Mukherjee's pithy formulation in this roundtable, India's strategy for the Indian Ocean seeks "to keep China out, the United States in, and Pakistan down."

New alignments like the Quad, or even the U.S.-India partnership, lack the firm security guarantees of the traditional U.S.-centered alliance system. Instead, as Kate Sullivan de Estrada shows, they bring new advantages of flexibility. Given the aforementioned uncertainty over China's intentions, such partnerships are well-equipped to adopt a risk-management approach to regional security. With no formal charter or mission, they allow partner states to join together in issue-based coalitions to address the strategic need of the hour, including nontraditional threats such as pandemics and

natural disasters. They cannot yet replace the alliance-based structures of conventional deterrence, but their open-endedness and looseness offer a different form of strategic deterrence. If Beijing is concerned by the prospect of countervailing coalitions, these flexible partnerships pose a latent threat of new and more numerous overlapping networks of similarly minded regional states.

This roundtable on Indian Ocean futures was designed not to predict the future course of events but to identify contestable assumptions in current policy settings. With China's strategic influence growing rapidly, policymakers in Washington and Canberra cannot sanguinely delegate Indian Ocean security management to India; nor can Indian Ocean states blithely assume that the United States will play the same role it traditionally has. Although India will most likely continue to grow more powerful, and the United States will most likely remain strategically committed to the Indian Ocean at least to some extent, even then policymakers could optimize current policy by deliberately and explicitly weighing the implications of this futures analysis. The strategic challenges in the Indian Ocean are defined more by uncertain risks than by predictable threats, as in the western Pacific. Managing this region's distinctive risks adeptly requires a greater acceptance of uncertainty and strategies to hedge against surprising actions by adversaries and partners alike. ◆