

CHOKE POINTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world after the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean. In recent times the Indian Ocean has gained prominence due to various factors. Prominent amongst these are the economic activities and its increasing geostrategic importance for littoral as well as non-littoral states. As these states vie for a larger pie of the natural resources present in the Ocean Basin as well as in the emerging Asian economies, it is witnessing clash of interest in the region and particularly in the choke points of the Indian Ocean. Over a period the choke points in the Indian Ocean has been contested both by the littoral and non -littoral states for obvious reasons.

Key Words: Indian Ocean, Choke points, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb littoral states, conflict, oil, IOR, trade and shipping, sea lines of communication



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Introduction

Amongst all the oceans of the world the Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean (after the Pacific and the Atlantic) covering 68.56 million square km. It occupies approximately 20 percent of the Earth's Sea surface. Of the three major oceans of the world, it is the smallest, geologically youngest and physically most complex of all. The Indian ocean's average depth is 12990 feet (3960 meters) and its deepest point is 24442 feet (7450 meters) in the Sunda Deep in the Java Trench off the Southern coast of the island of Java, Indonesia. Geographically the Indian Ocean is bounded to the north by the Indian subcontinent; to the west and northwest by the east African coast and Arabian Peninsula respectively; to the east by Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia and Australia; and to the south by the oceanic margin with the Southern Ocean at Latitude 60°S. The Indian Ocean, unlike the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean is land locked on the north and does not extend into the cold climate regions of the northern hemisphere. The other two oceans, i.e., the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean are open oceans, whereas the Indian Ocean is a closed ocean. The Indian Ocean also includes several regional seas and sea areas

such as the Andaman Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Great Australian Bight, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Mannar, the Gulf of Oman, the Mozambique Channel, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Though the issue of defining the exact limits of the Indian Ocean remains unsettled, according to the Indian Maritime Doctrine, - *'the Indian Ocean is separated from the Atlantic Ocean by the meridian of 20° East and from the Pacific by the meridian of 147° East. The Northern limit of the Indian Ocean is the Persian Gulf, at the approximate latitude of 30° North. Extending southwards down to the parallel of latitude 60° South, it may be seen as a walled ocean bounded on three sides by land. Africa forms the western wall, while Malaysia, Myanmar, and the insular continuations of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia form the eastern wall.'*

The Indian Ocean Region

There is no unique understanding of what should be considered as the region of the Indian Ocean and its extent. The proposition for the Indian Ocean Region derives from the fact that the ocean itself is the core element of the region, to which it gives its name and its coherence, representing its geographical centre and being the physical link with the countries of the region. In this context, and considering states as the relevant units of the regional geopolitical system, a broad definition of the Indian Ocean Region would include the Indian Ocean, with all its tributary water bodies Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Malacca Strait, 38 coastal states, as well as 13 land-locked states for which the transit to and from the sea is mostly oriented towards the Indian Ocean. This coastal and land-locked states include 23 African states and 25 Asian states. It also includes Australia, France (for Crozet, Kerguelen, Mayotte, Reunion, St. Paul & Amsterdam and the Scattered Islands). The United Kingdom also becomes a part of Indian Ocean Region due to the British Indian Ocean Territory. These 51 states can be categorized into Indian Ocean Rim States (28), Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf (10) and Indian Ocean Land-locked states (13). Only France and United Kingdom amongst these states are exceptional cases as they are European, however they extend and effectively implement their sovereignty over some island territories in the Indian Ocean (Scattered Island and the Chagos Archipelago). As such, they enjoy the rights and have the obligations granted to any coastal states in the International Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This also qualifies them to be Indian Ocean coastal states. (Bouchard 2007).

Combined together, this region covers an area close to 102,000,000 sq km (2/3 of sea and 1/3 of land). It covers 20% of the entire globe's surface and has approximately 41% of world's populations.

Choke points

A choke point refers to a point of natural congestion along with two wider and important navigable passages. Maritime choke points are congestive pathways in some of the world's famous shipping routes. Although there are numerous such choke points around the world, a few of them are extremely important for international shipping.

The Malaccan Strait, Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal, Panama Canal, Strait of Bosphorus, Danish Straits, Strait of Bab el-Mandeb are some of the important choke points in various places around the world. In the Indian Ocean the Strait of Hormuz, the Malaccan Strait and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb are the most important choke points not only in terms of international shipping routes, but also from a strategic point.

In March, this year, the accident that blocked the maritime traffic in the Suez Canal for several days renewed the attention on the impact that straits have on international politics and economy. A strait is an arm of water between two lands that connects two contiguous water basins. Maritime shipping is a core element in globalized trade and therefore, straits offer a key advantage in this context.

The geographical position of the Straits makes it one of the most important routes for trade of energy, oil and hydrocarbons, commodities, and consumer goods across the world. The relevance of the straits can be measured by the fact that hundreds of vessels travel the straits on a daily basis. Given that more than 80% of global trade is moved by sea, one can imagine the volume of trade taking place through these passages.

The Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz lies between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. It is located within the overlapping territorial waters of Iran and Oman, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The strait is 90 nautical miles (167 km) long. It is the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean. At its narrowest point the Strait is 21 miles (approx. 34 kms) wide and widest at about 52 nautical miles (approx. 84 kms).

It is considered as the one of the world's strategically most important choke points due to its geographical location and the presence of oil producing and exporting countries in the region. The large volume of oil that flow through the strait across the world makes it strategically

important for both the oil exporting and importing countries. According to the EIA (Energy Information Administration), in 2016, the Strait of Hormuz saw a daily flow of averaged 21 million barrels per day, or the equivalent of about 21% of global crude oil, condensate and petroleum products. More than 85% of these exports were to Asian markets, with China, India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore being the largest destinations.

The Strait of Hormuz is critical for global oil supply because of its unique location. There are limited options to bypass the Strait, as only two states Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have pipelines that can ship crude oil outside the Persian Gulf and have the additional pipeline capacity to circumvent the Strait of Hormuz.

The Strait of Hormuz is a strategically important strait or narrow strip of water that links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. The strait is only 21 to 60 miles (33 to 95 km) wide throughout its length. The Strait of Hormuz is important because it is a geographic chokepoint and a main artery for the transport of oil from the Middle East. Iran and Oman are the countries nearest to the Strait of Hormuz and share territorial rights over the waters.

The Malaccan Strait

Located around 1.43° N and 102.89° E, the Strait of Malacca, (also spelled Melaka) also known as Selat Melaka in Malay, is a narrow, 500 miles (805 km) stretch of water between Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) and the Indonesian Island of Sumatra. At its narrowest point in the Phillips Channel of the Singapore Strait, the Strait of Malacca is only about 1.7 miles (approx. 3km) wide. The Strait of Malacca and Singapore Strait form the main seaway connecting the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea. Named after the Malacca Sultanate, as the main shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, it is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. It is the busiest strait in the world with some 100,000 vessels plying annually through it. An estimated 25% of the world's trade passes through this narrow strait, making it economically and strategically very important. In strategic terms, it is understood that whoever controls the Malacca Strait, might as well control the stability in South-East Asia.

While Singapore is the most important location in terms of container shipment, the Strait is the main shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, linking major Asian economies such as India, China, Japan and South Korea. Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia,

Vietnam and Taiwan are other economies which depend on their oil export on the Strait. It is the shortest sea route between Persian Gulf suppliers and key Asian markets.

Bab el-Mandeb Strait

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strait of great strategic and economic importance, connecting the Red Sea in the northwest to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean in the southeast. The strait's Arabic name means "the gate of tears," so called from the dangers that formerly attended its navigation. The strait also separates Arabia in the northeast from the African continent in the southwest. The Bab el-Mandeb further acts as a link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The strait is divided into two channels by the Yemeni island of Perim, with the eastern channel being called Alexander's Strait and is around 3 kilometers wide, while the western-lying Dact-el-Mayun Channel is 26 kilometers wide

With the building of the Suez Canal, the strait assumed great strategic and economic importance, forming a portion of the link between the Mediterranean Sea and East Asia. The flow through this strait provides for the circulation between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, since no flow takes place through the Suez Canal. This waterway, located between the Arab Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, represents an economic and political entanglement of players in the Red Sea region, but also one of the straits most subject to violence, famine, piracy, and the global pandemic effects – most notably along the Somali coasts.

The Bab el-Mandeb serves as a strategic oil trade route between the Middle East and the European countries. It allows a direct connection between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal. Closure of this strait would thus force the oil tankers from the Persian Gulf to navigate all the way across the southern tip of Africa towards the north to reach the countries of the European Union, costing huge losses in terms of time and money. Besides oil, the strait also serves as a navigation route for non-oil vessels moving between the Middle East and Mediterranean countries. Currently, a bridge, prospectively to be named as the 'Bridge of Horns', has been proposed to be built on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait between the coasts of Yemen and Djibouti.

Threats to the choke points

The Choke points in the Indian Ocean are vulnerable to a number of threats which can destabilise not just the immediate region but have the potential to endanger global security. Instability of littorals, closure/ denial of choke points, maritime accidents, large scale presence

of extra regional powers, coupled with maritime terrorism, increased piracy, make the IOR a volatile zone. In addition, natural disasters like Tsunamis also pose a serious threat to maritime trade in the region.

This paper attempts to assess the threats faced by three major choke points; i.e. the Strait of Hormuz, the Malaccan Strait and Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Indian Ocean which have the potential to become flash points for large scale escalation of conflict engulfing the entire IOR. Despite its small size, the Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important shipping routes and is the only chokepoint under a direct threat of closure by a nation within the chokepoint's region. The UNCLOS rules allow countries to exercise control up to 12 nautical miles (13.8 miles) from their coastline. This means that at its narrowest point, the strait and its shipping lanes lie entirely within Iran and Oman's territorial waters. In 2016, the strait was the world's busiest sea route for oil. It carried about 19 million barrels a day - more than the 16 million barrels a day that went through the Strait of Malacca, a major international waterway in the Indian Ocean. During the 1980-88 war between Iraq and Iran, Iraqi forces attacked an oil export terminal at Kharg Island, northwest of the strait, in part to provoke an Iranian retaliation that would draw the U.S. into the conflict. Although Iran didn't try to shut the strait, there followed the Tanker War in which the sides attacked 451 vessels between them. That significantly raised the cost of insuring tankers and helped push up oil prices. When sanctions were imposed on Iran in 2011, it threatened to close the strait, but ultimately backed off. Tensions between Iran, other Gulf Arab states, and the West have remained high over the past decade. The military exercises which Iran holds every year in the region escalates the threat of conflict, either with its neighbours or the US and its allies.

The Strait of Malacca face multiple security issues that affect the three littoral states and the Straits' user nations. Its geographical position makes it valuable not only to the border states of the waterway, but also to the non-littorals who depend on it for commercial purpose.

Although piracy in the strait has declined in recent years, the number of pirate attacks in the region still ranks highly when compared with the world's other important waterways. While piracy may be a diminished threat, terrorism is a growing concern as numerous terrorist organizations are present in the region. It is also a transit hub for myriad black markets and a haven for belligerent non-state actors due to the porous borders in adjoining states and poorly monitored ports.

Traffic in the Malacca strait has been continuously increasing over the decades as the demand for oil has increased, particularly from growing Asian economies. The Chinese have expressed their ‘Malacca Dilemma’ over the vulnerability of their sea lines carrying crude oil and other petroleum products.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait (“Gate of Tears” in Arabic) forms a vital strategic link in the maritime trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. On one side of the narrow strait lies the Arabian Peninsula. On the other is the Horn of Africa, a fragile region that has been plagued for decades by high levels of violence and instability within and across borders, and which in recent years has served as a launching pad for terrorism, piracy, human trafficking, and smuggling operations.

The attack of the USS Cole on 12 October 2000 was a major act of terrorism in the Gulf of Aden. Since that time, terror organizations have planned several attacks against oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf and in the Horn of Africa. For example, in October 2002, Al-Qaeda attacked a French supertanker off Yemen. Just as the USS Cole brought attention to terrorism in the Gulf of Aden, the hijacking of the oil tanker, Sirius Star, on 17 November 2008, brought worldwide attention to piracy as a threat to maritime security. Acts of piracy have become more frequent as pirates have regularly used “mother ships” to increase their range. As a result, the old warning to stay at least 50 nautical miles from the coast has been replaced by warnings to stay at least 200 nautical miles away. Many local and regional challenges in the region still remain unresolved. The Horn of Africa has fast become an arena in which Middle Eastern states are vying with each other to advance their commercial and geopolitical interests in the broader context of intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-first century geopolitical dynamics increasingly revolve around the maritime domain for various reasons including military use or for shipping and navigation. This has raised the strategic importance of the Straits in the Indian Ocean

Even though, globally the incidence of armed conflict appears to be in long-term decline: the number of active conflicts worldwide fell from 63 in 2008 to 40 in 2015, the wars have become more intense. Despite this global trend, it is reasonable to assume that certain regions will remain vulnerable to conflict for the foreseeable future. More than half the world’s armed conflicts are presently located in the Indian Ocean region. The waters of IOR are home to continually evolving strategic developments including the competing rises of China and India,

potential nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamist terrorism, growing incidence of piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, and management of diminishing fishery resources.

Most littoral countries at the choke points in the IOR are still struggling to stabilise socio-politically. In addition, ailing economies and lack of education and employment opportunities have made these areas prone to the influence of extra regional powers.

The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are considered among the most strategically important in the world—according to the Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, more than 80 percent of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 percent passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent through the Strait of Malacca and 8 percent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait.

Political, religious, ethnic, and territorial disputes have made the world anxious in anticipation of obstruction of the major commercial sea lines of communication throwing the global supply chain in chaos.

As a result of all this, almost all the world's major powers US, Russia, UK, France, India, and China have deployed substantial military forces in the Indian Ocean region which has increased the possibility of conflict. Conflict of any nature, between two nation states of the region would impinge on the safety of maritime trade in the IOR.

To deal effectively with maritime security threats in the Straits, a number of challenges need to be overcome. These include the effectiveness of the implementation of the agreed tripartite coordinated sea and air patrols programs, sides reach agreement on establishing a burden-sharing mechanism or a multilateral international cooperative security mechanism in the Strait. It also requires a structured process for regional confidence building and security cooperation among nations and territories in the IOR region.

Effective management of security in the Straits can be reached through an acceptable approach that can be a compromise between the littoral States' sovereign concerns and the user States' demand for a more direct involvement in security matters in the strait. This requires that both come to mutually agreeable terms.

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