

Great Power Competition and Collaboration

Navigating Indian Ocean Region

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Paper

Abstract

The inherent competitive drive, which humans are bestowed with by nature, while becoming the precursor of evolution and development of this world, has also caused misery and destruction when it went unrefined. This paper gives a brief overview of the power struggle between major powers during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which necessitated the establishment and continuation of the United Nations to prevent conflicts from turning into wars. It discusses the current and emerging scenario, the transition from unipolar to multipolar world order, where China, through its flagship BRI and other development initiatives, is playing a leading role in “building a community of shared future”, challenging US imperialist policies and exceptionalism. It navigates through the great power competition in the Indian Ocean Region, where the US, India, and China vie for “strategic advantage”, which poses a risk to common maritime resources of the Indian Ocean. While these evolving regional dynamics bring a new set of challenges, they also present some opportunities. To tap these potentials and achieve sustainable “shared growth” and equitable share and management of maritime resources, collective efforts are needed to strengthen global governance.

Keywords: Indian Ocean; SLOCS; China; Belt and Road Initiative; US-India Partnership; Global Governance.

Competition, Collaboration and the Cosmos

On August 24, 2023, scientists announced they had discovered six new exoplanets outside our solar system. Thus, the number of exoplanets discovered so far has reached 5,502, and it is only 31 years since the first exoplanet was confirmed in 1992.¹ Scientists have identified thousands of other exoplanets. Therefore, based on the speed with which science and technology

are now developing, it can be said that in the coming days, this process will progress even more rapidly.²

It is important to recognize, in this context, that whoever created the world with such vast dimensions and with countless blessings and potentials has also given humans the urge and ability to discover, develop and utilize them for their needs and to improve the

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¹ Chelsea Gohd, “Discovery Alert: With Six New Worlds, 5,500 Discovery Milestone Passed!” Exoplanet Exploration –Nasa, accessed October 7, 2023, <https://exoplanets.nasa.gov/news/1767/discovery-alert-with-six-new-worlds-5500-discovery-milestone-passed/>.

² “92 Percent of Possible Earth Twins Have Yet to Be Born,” Smithsonian Magazine, accessed October 7, 2023, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/most-universes-planets-havent-even-formed-yet-180957023/>.

quality of life.³ And while there has been marked progress in every field of knowledge, every new finding suggests there is a lot more to discover and learn. There are superoceans underneath the Earth, which are still a mystery; signs of life in the upper atmosphere have also been observed. But without any clue as to how this has occurred, we are still unaware of what we will find in the deepest depth on the ocean floor, and we don't know what is buried and preserved underneath the frozen world. Most of all, we are discovering new knowledge about our bodies every other day.

Efforts in all these areas of knowledge and research in this context should be regarded as an extremely desirable and most-needed phenomenon.⁴ But there is a challenge mankind is facing, a dilemma while trying to achieve the objectives of exploiting such potentials, i.e. competition turning into conflict.

Competition: A Blessing or a Blight?

Nature has also placed a natural spirit of competition in human beings.⁵ In fact, it is a phenomenon that is found in almost all areas of human life – both at the micro level, in individual, social, and professional domains, and at the macro level, linked to the group, institutional and state competition leading to effects on global competition in the long-run. In reality, it is one of those blessings which hones human abilities. It stimulates thinking, exploration and innovation. And owing to this feature of the human psyche, all technological and scientific developments have become possible.

However, this spirit of competition remains a blessing only as long as it is healthy and based on the goal of improving the collective life. If competition is not healthy, it turns into conflict and enmity and becomes a curse instead of a blessing for human beings.⁶

While the nature of competition and its dynamics keep changing, most of the history of mankind is a witness of competition becoming a curse as it turns into an urge to control humans and occupy resources and land. Consequently, it takes the shape of conflict, leads to

extreme rivalry and finally turns into war where the human potential is directed towards death and destruction.

Competition and War – Watershed Moments in 20th Century and Onwards

Without delving deep into history, a cursory look at the 20th century and the first quarter of the ongoing one highlights some distinct but overlapping watershed moments in this phenomenon of competition whirling into war in order to gain maximum control over the human and material resources of the world by the powerful competing forces.

The prominent phase of the first period was characterized by two world wars that caused catastrophic damage, diminishing towns, forcing displacements, homecomings, and redrawing borders. By the end of World War II, huge swathes of Europe and Asia were turned into rubble and ruins, and around 80 million people perished, i.e., “killing off about 4 percent of the whole world”.⁷ Meanwhile, the technology, techniques and dynamics of war also changed with greater potential for destruction, and the world saw the emergence of new alliances and groupings.

In this backdrop, the second turning point relates to the period after the establishment of the UN in 1945. The global body was established to prevent the devastation that future wars could cause. The UN Charter states that the UN was founded to “save succeeding generations from the suffering of war”. A number of other institutions were also established and laws were formulated to address the causes and consequences of wars under a new world order. All these were apparently good moves, and from then on the conflicts between the great powers did not turn into open and direct wars among them.

Yet, a ‘Cold War’ for control of the world’s resources began, new fronts of wars opened, and new patterns of violation of laws through law-fare emerged in the form of hybrid and proxy wars, with a greater role of non-state actors, and perception management through the

³ “Have Humans Discovered Every Part of Earth,” Quora, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.quora.com/Have-humans-discovered-every-part-of-earth>.

⁴ “65% of Earth is Unexplored,” Sentient Media, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://sentientmedia.org/earth-is-unexplored/>.

⁵ “Why Do Humans Naturally Love to Compete – Besting their Peers?” Nit’s Journal, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://nitsjournal.com/psychology/why-do-humans-naturally-love-to-compete-besting-their-peers/>.

⁶ The classical sociologists Park and Burgess discussed the escalation of competition into conflict much as one might describe a phase transition: as heat converts water to steam, a shift in the social context can turn dispassionate competitors into warring enemies. PNAS, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1717303115>.

⁷ Alan Taylor, “World War II: After the War,” The Atlantic, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/10/world-war-ii-after-the-war/100180/>.



mass media and social media. This phenomenon is overlapping and continues to prominently feature, with greater intensity, in the trajectory of wars even today.⁸ Consequently, despite the formation of the UN, more than 250 small or big wars have been fought during the last around 80 years. Meanwhile, the world body set a special goal [number 16] under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to prevent wars.⁹ It calls for “all member states to provoke peaceful co-existence among people ... and that primary targets include reducing arms flow and combatting organized crimes as well as significantly reducing all forms of violence worldwide...” Nevertheless, conflicts continue to turn into wars, and extreme violence has not been eliminated.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, brought an end to the Cold War. Consequently, the world experienced a new pattern of relationships during the next few years. A pattern where there was only one superpower, or many would call it hyperpower, and no one was directly able to match its strengths in terms of comprehensive power. It was a new turning point in the history of competition, shaping into war. Initially, it appeared that the human struggle for security and progress in (the world) could be transformed into an arena of cooperation and competition through peaceful means, as for the time being, there were practically no matching rivals for the leadership at the top. It was openly claimed as well that after capitalist, liberal and Western democracy gained supremacy over other ideologies, the globalized world of the 21st century would move towards collective security and prosperity.¹⁰

Nevertheless, following the unilateralist approach adopted by the sole superpower, backed by its allies, for seeking all-out supremacy and control over the world based on bullying, coercion and pressure, where the developing countries are the “worst-hit areas”, a series of wars was witnessed. According to a 2023 Xinhua report, “America’s Coercive Diplomacy and Its Harm,” coercive diplomacy is the basic tool that the US employs to reign the world:

“Today, coercive diplomacy is a standard instrument in the US foreign policy toolbox, and containment and suppression in political, economic, military, cultural and other fields have been used to conduct coercive diplomacy around the world for pure US self-interest. Countries around the world have suffered, with developing countries bearing the brunt of it, and even US’ allies and partners have not been spared.”

It is estimated that “Between 1776 and 2019, the US conducted nearly 400 military interventions worldwide, half of which occurred between 1950 and 2019”, playing its “Just War Doctrine” and coercive tactics.¹¹ The culmination of this strategy came in 2001 and after, when the War on Terror (WoT) was headlined, and a new division was created in the world.

The belligerent behavior of the sole superpower and its engagements in wars in different regions of the world¹² reinvigorated the need for a new balance and led to another turning point. While it was not a clash-like situation it provided the two major powers, outside the US/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led group, the space to take advantage of the opportunity and strengthen themselves politically and

⁸ “21st Century Conflicts,” accessed October 10, 2023, Helion & Company, <https://www.helion.co.uk/periods/21st-century.php?sid=df163ab94f318723ebbef7f0a276712a>.

⁹ According to the United Nations charter, the global entity was established to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. Unfortunately, since the charter was signed in 1946, the number of wars fought has crossed 250. The SDG 16 “Promote Just, Peaceful, and Inclusive Societies”, calls for efforts by all member states to “promote peaceful co-existence among people”. Among its primary objectives, “reducing arms flows and combatting organized crime, as well as significantly reducing all forms of violence worldwide” are included. “Peace and Conflict Resolution,” United Nations, accessed October 12, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/peace-and-conflict-resolution>.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, political theorist, famously pronounced that “the end of the Cold War marked ‘the end of history’, a triumph of capitalist, liberal Western democracy over competing ideologies”. The 21st century humanity was believed to end up as “a globalized post-conflict society moving in deterministic concert toward collective peace and prosperity”. Though Fukuyama’s claim was greatly challenged by the September 11, 2001, incident and the subsequent infamous US’ WoT, open warfare between nation-states became a rare phenomenon in the post-Cold War era. Instead, civil wars, terrorism, and hybrid and special operations warfare, and ethnic conflict accounted for most of the “non-state, intrastate, and interstate violence”. While the battle death rate has been greatly reduced in the 21st century, in contrast to similar time spans in the previous century, these numbers nonetheless represent scores of lives lost each year. Michael Ray, “8 Deadliest Wars of the 21st Century,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/list/8-deadliest-wars-of-the-21st-century>.

¹¹ “America’s Coercive Diplomacy and Its Harm,” Xinhua, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230518/56b84e3237f441518f03a0cf76504fa4/c.html>.

¹² Ibid.



economically. Since then, Russia has reemerged, and China, while it does not claim itself, has now developed into a major global power. In a number of ways, it has emerged as one of the two strongest players, if not the strongest, in navigating the global competition.

Thus, great power competition, which was thought to take years to come, has begun to jostle the world too soon. It is now recognized that there is no single superpower in the world but multiple centers of power. On the one hand, it has created a balance of power that can be regarded as a barrier to war and destruction, but on the other hand, at a time when the global governance system, because of its weaknesses, seems largely unable to prevent armed conflicts and when the world is facing numerous problems due to traditional and non-traditional security reasons, this situation can even cause existential threats to the world. There is now a new competition and grouping, though not very tightly knit, which has most of the Western countries and middle powers like South Korea, Japan and India siding together under the leadership of the US, and its European allies are found in one fold while China and Russia remain outside the fold along with many developing countries.

The Current and Emerging Scenario

This has triggered a new global equilibrium, and competition has taken a new turn, with China emerging as the key navigator in world affairs. China-led transition is characterized by the following features:

- For the first time in around five centuries, it represents a non-Western dominated initiative towards world governance; Beijing's moves are influencing the patterns of competition in international relations.¹³
- China is steadily working to create a new global order defined by its own set of rules, norms, and values. The Western norms, standards, and practices are still in vogue, but these are under scrutiny and losing significance.

- With the shift in the global gravity center from the West to the East, China is offering a strategic option to the Global South. An alternative, which is characterized by more equitable economic and political order.
- Increased attention towards innovation in technology and the Fourth Industrial Revolution have strengthened China's position. It has given a new shade to strategic competition, and now the pursuit of warfare by kinetic means is shifting to new fields such as maritime, cyberspace, information, space, and economic competition.
- China is not interested in imposing its norms and values as opposed to the prevailing Western-led model of governance, where the powerful countries consider that the whole world should follow their value system and run their societies according to their worldview.¹⁴
- Instead of increasing war frenzy, China initiated a grand connectivity project in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), under the concepts of shared destiny and win-win cooperation. Thus, using the advantages of globalization, advances in technology, and the growing importance of geo-economics, it is giving the competition a new dimension of cooperation. BRI has been reinforced with institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB).
- In the spirit of promoting equality, inclusivity, and diversity through connectivity and cooperation, China has launched three new initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).¹⁵ The initiatives, like BRI, have drawn unprecedented attention and criticism, with some calling out Chinese leadership for attempting "supplanting the US as the world's leading power", making ingress in the developing countries, and aiming to

¹³ In September 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron, during a meeting with diplomats in Paris, admitted that Western supremacy was coming to a close, "we should learn to accept the fact that 300 years of Western hegemony is coming to an end".

¹⁴ It is pertinent to quote here Chinese President Xi to have a clear understanding of the transition path China is expected to follow: "All countries, irrespective of size, strength and wealth are equal. The right of the people to independently choose their development path should be respected, interference in the internal affairs of other countries [should be] opposed and international fairness and justice [should be] maintained... the people can best tell if the development path they have chosen for their country suits [them] or not."

¹⁵ Li Qiang, "Following the Vision of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and Bringing More Certainty to World Peace and Development," speech at Boao Forum for Asia, March 30, 2023, http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202303/t20230331_11052581.htm.



change the world order into multipolar and “reshaping the world development”.¹⁶ However, China’s stance is clear and aims to advance “humanity’s modernization process” and ultimately build a community “with a shared future for mankind”. As the Chinese diplomat Chao Xiaoliang stated:¹⁷

“Amid the momentous shifts where uncertainty abounds, the GDI, GSI and GCI proposed by China not only contribute China’s solution to global governance, but inject China’s strength to improve the common well-being of all mankind.”

Thus, China’s focus revolves around connectivity and cooperation among countries, cultures and civilizations. To what extent such an approach will be successful in widely transforming global governance and directing human energies towards the common good instead of conflict is dependent on a number of factors, the most important of which is the continuity or otherwise of the overall paradigm of governance which the world is currently following. The paradigm is essentially derived from the concept of ‘survival of the fittest’ and thus recognizes ‘selfishness’ as an inherent driver and acceptable feature of human life.¹⁸ The paradigm teaches one to acquire as much power as possible and use it not only for one’s survival but also to overpower others.

This is simply a prescription for destruction; for exploiting the global common, the common good should be pursued. And for that, the world needs a fair and just system and promotion of cooperation and collaboration. Yet, the selfishness in the name of ‘self’, corporate or so-called ‘national interest’ does

not practically allow any genuine cooperation to take wing. On the other hand, building a “community of shared interests and shared future”¹⁹ proposed by China stresses struggle and making contributions for mutual benefits and the survival of all.

Seen in this context, one finds inherent differences in the two approaches to human conduct. Thus, the real challenge and test for Beijing, with its rising global influence, will be to integrate the concepts of shared destiny as the primary value in the global system.

Nevertheless, it is significant to note that Beijing’s initiative of connectivity, motivated by the spirit of community with shared interest rather than destiny, has led to several new connectivity, development and security initiatives announced even by its adversaries, at least in the form if not in substance. For instance, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced during the recently held G20 meeting, is the latest in this series of announcements. This is, in fact, the fifth such attempt in the last five years. In 2018, the US Congress, with a \$60 billion outlay, passed the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act; in 2021, President Biden announced the Build Back Better World (B3W). The B3W was later relaunched as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure & Investment; then, the European Union announced its own initiative similar to BRI, calling it Global Gateway.²⁰ Furthermore, in 2021, Australia, the UK, and the US announced a trilateral strategic partnership called AUKUS²¹ between the three countries for “bolstering security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to

¹⁶ George P. Manson, “Making a Multipolar World with China on Top: Beijing’s New Foreign Policy Initiatives Advance its Long-Term Ambitions,” Naval War College, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1210077.pdf>. Also see, Tuvia Gering, “The Dawn of Xivilization: Israel and China’s New Global Initiatives,” Institute for National Security Studies, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep51458>.

¹⁷ Chao Xiaoliang, “Initiatives Proposed by China, Fruitful Outcomes Shared by World,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, accessed October 14, 2023, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202305/t20230522_11081047.htm.

¹⁸ Greg Graffin, “‘Survival of the Fittest’ Is a Sham,” *Time Magazine*, September 21, 2015, <https://time.com/4028998/survival-of-the-fittest-is-a-sham/>. Graffin argues that the ideology of “survival of the fittest” oversimplifies evolutionary science. The term is also used to justify “American exceptionalism”. He underscores, it is coexistence which should be pursued, not competition, and exalting a certain nation above others as “superior”.

¹⁹ Jun Ding and Hongjin Cheng, “China’s Proposition to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind and the Middle East Governance,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 1-14, DOI: 10.1080/25765949.2017.12023314.

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²¹ Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) security partnership.



counterbalance China's growing power and influence in the region".²²

While these initiatives are prime examples of competition as well as cooperation as discussed above, they do not indicate any change or shift in the current paradigm, which is based on shared community. Seen in this overall context, the threat of competition turning into clashes and sometimes even into wars cannot be ruled out, at least for the time being. The communiqué of the G7 Summit held on May 20, 2023, (in Hiroshima, Japan) presents a good example to understand how the great power competition is currently shaping. The declaration embodies both the collaboration and competition dimensions: collaboration between the Group of Seven (G7)²³ countries and competition with the other major global players that are not part of the group.²⁴ The communiqué signals a shift in G7 countries' approach towards China by stressing the phrase "de-risking, not decoupling."²⁵

As often happens in diplomacy, the statement does not elaborate on the two terms, probably to cover some differences among the allies. Yet, it clearly portrays China as a risk and a threat to the world to justify its containment. Importantly, however, the term "decoupling" is becoming increasingly irrelevant and impractical in view of Beijing's successful collaborative approach.

It is not surprising that the Chinese,²⁶ as well as some Western commentators, including Martin Wolf, a British expert on global economics,²⁷ have criticized the "de-risking" term. They emphasized that China offers possibilities rather than risks and that "de-risking" is a cover for keeping China in check, and warned that "de-risking" will result in more dangers. Going even more vocal, the US was pointed out as the real risk factor.

This reflects the emerging global scenario vis-à-vis great power competition. Obviously, the chances of strategic competition among great and middle powers, both from the region and outside, seem to intensify in the coming days. This would mean along with long-term and overall strategies, specific measures are required to face the competition in various domains of life. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is no exception.

Global Competition and the Indian Ocean

The UN advocates sustainable use of maritime resources, necessitating transnational collaboration under its goal 14, "Life Below Water". According to a UN representative, "[B]lue economy challenges us to realize that the sustainable management of ocean resources will require collaboration across borders and sectors through a variety of partnerships, and on a scale that has not been previously achieved."²⁸ Therefore, an optimal strategy of collaboration based on mutual cooperation is indispensable, in principle, to

²² Lauren Kahn, "AUKUS Explained: How will the Trilateral Pact Shape Indo-Pacific Security?" Council on Foreign Relations, June 12, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/aukus-explained-how-will-trilateral-pact-shape-indo-pacific-security>.

²³ The Group of Seven (G7) is an "informal bloc" of seven advanced economies, including the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, as well as the European Union.

²⁴ How China looks at G7? It would be pertinent to quote President Xi here. While commenting on the alliance, he said, "The G7 is meeting with a shared vision of 'market democracies' setting the rules of international relations. What this means in reality is the continuation of US-led imperialism. In contrast, China proposes a multipolar world where every country can choose its development path." "Xi Jinping on Multipolarity," Friends of Socialist China, accessed October 22, 2023, <https://socialistchina.org/2021/06/10/xi-jinping-quote-on-multipolarity/>.

²⁵ US President Joe Biden at the end of the summit stressed in a press conference: "We're not looking to decouple from China. We're looking to de-risk and diversify our relationship with China." Trevor Hunnicutt and Jeff Mason, "Biden Sees Shift in Ties with China 'Shortly'," Reuters, accessed October 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-sees-shift-relations-with-china-shortly-says-g7-wants-de-risk-not-decouple-2023-05-21/>; and Rishika Singh, "De-risking, not Decoupling: What's this G7 Strategy Against China?" *The Indian Express*, accessed October 21, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/g7-talks-about-de-risking-in-reference-to-china-what-does-this-mean-8623161/>.

²⁶ James Crabtree, "U.S.-China De-Risking Will Inevitably Escalate," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/20/derisking-decoupling-us-china-biden-economy-trade-technology-semiconductors-chips-supply-chains-ai-geopolitics-escalation/>; Spriha Srivastava, "China Slams the West for 'Hyping up' the Concept of 'De-risking.' Here's What it Means and Why China is so Worried," accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-derisking-decoupling-difference-strategy-definition-wef-2023-6>; Liz Lee and Satoshi Sugiyama, "Beijing Rebukes Japan, Britain over 'Anti-China' G7 Summit," accessed October 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-summons-japanese-ambassador-over-actions-g7-2023-05-22/>.

²⁷ Larry Neild, "Interview: China has Capacity to Sustain Rapid Growth – Financial Times Economics Commentator," *Xinhua*, September 29, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230929/533bbe483a0345048eaa635f0040ffca/c.html>.

²⁸ "Blue Economy Definitions," United Nations, accessed October 21, 2023, https://www.un.org/regularprocess/sites/www.un.org.regularprocess/files/rok_part_2.pdf.



utilize the blue and coastal economy potentials associated with the Indian Ocean.²⁹

The Indian Ocean, being the third largest and warmest ocean, covering almost 20 percent of the Earth's total surface, makes a huge contribution to the water load of the world. With more than 50 littoral states and important trade routes, while accounting for 40 percent of the world's oil production and having huge mineral deposits and other natural resources, it occupies an extremely important position in the global commons. In the emerging geopolitical and geo-economic context, many would prefer calling it "Ocean of the Centre" or "Ocean of the Future" instead of "Ocean of the South".³⁰ No wonder it is becoming the gravity center of competition.

Not only the regional countries but also extra-regional countries are eyeing the resources in the Indian Ocean as well as aiming to gain control over the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and straits passing through it and connecting Asia, Africa, Australia, and Antarctica. This has naturally turned the IOR into a field of great encounters for great powers. Though traditional security threats have always existed in the IOR, the recent developments, while intensifying strategic competition among great and middle powers from both regional and extra-regional countries, have increased the risks.³¹

However, promoting a collaborative approach to optimize the marine sources for sustainable use and shared growth, in line with the UN principles, is indispensable and challenging at the same time, given the competing interests of regional and international powers.

Key Alliances in IOR

Before specifically coming to the IOR, it would be pertinent to have a brief discussion on the current state of relationships between the important countries in the region vis-à-vis competition and collaboration between them. It goes without saying that the US and China are the key navigators on whose initiatives the state of future competition and collaboration is largely dependent. It is also now an established fact that the US, along with its traditional allies, has chosen India as its strategic ally, particularly in the IOR. Thus, the discussion, though not exhaustive, will briefly broach the important developments in the recent trajectory of their relations.

During the last two decades, almost all American presidents have made efforts to make India the key partner of the US in the Indo-Pacific. The current US administration has further increased the level of defense cooperation with new agreements to provide access to India in strategic matters and defense technology. The Biden administration has named the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – the mechanism for security dialogue between Australia, Japan, India and the US – as a "centerpiece" and "pillar of its regional strategy".³²

A continuation of this strategy is the unusual protocol accorded to Indian Prime Minister Modi during his visit³³ to the US and the number and nature of agreements signed.³⁴ The same spirit of giving India a greater role was reflected in the G20 meeting held in New Delhi when the IMEC project was announced on the sidelines of the summit. This connectivity plan, which has been proposed in practice against the BRI, is to be implemented as a joint effort of the US and its

²⁹ "Major Powers' Interests in Indian Ocean: Challenges and Options for Pakistan," Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2015, <https://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Indian-ocean.pdf>; and Jia Yu and Zhang Xiaoyi, "The Maritime Strategy of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping," *Journal of Boundary and Ocean Studies*, 2018, <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-maritime-strategy-of-mao-zedong-deng-xiaoping-and-xi-jinping/>.

³⁰ Timothy Doyle, Graham Seal, "Indian Ocean Futures: New Partnerships, New Alliances and Academic Diplomacy," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 1 (2015): 2-7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2015.1019994>.

³¹ We know that none of the G7 countries belong to the IOR, including China. Nonetheless, knowing that China has strengthened its diplomatic and political relations across the globe the G7 summit communiqué referred above has a direct bearing on the IOR also.

³² "The 'Quad': Security Cooperation Among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia," Congressional Research Service, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11678.pdf>; and Ashley J. Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India: New Delhi Won't Side With Washington Against Beijing," *Foreign Affairs*, accessed October 21, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>.

³³ In June 2023.

³⁴ "India-USA Joint Statement during the Official State Visit of Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi to USA," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, accessed October 12, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36711/IndiaUSA+Joint+Statement+during+the+Official+State+visit+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modi+to+USA>; also see Jarrett Renshaw, "Flurry of US-India Deals on AI, Defense as Biden, Modi Meet," *Reuters*, accessed October 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-modi-meet-flurry-new-us-india-deals-2023-06-22/>.



allies.³⁵ There is no doubt that these US efforts are more a part of arrangements to contain China's growing global footprint than merely because of bilateral interests. And when it comes to stopping China's growing steps, naturally, all US allies, including Europe, Japan and Australia, are part of it.

It is, however, worth noting that the US and Indian objectives regarding security partnership are not completely harmonious. Acquiring advanced technology (including defense technology) and capability from the US is certainly India's need and goal to eventually join the ranks of the great powers itself. Similarly, balancing China's influence in the region is also an important part of its strategy. Nevertheless, knowing its weaknesses in the balance of power,³⁶ New Delhi would not want a direct military confrontation with China, given that its "military has been eroded by a lack of focus and changing priorities" as well as "under-investment". Nonetheless, in the event of such a conflict, it wants to ensure the support of the US as well as procurement of the latest weaponry from Israel.³⁷

Thus, there are many questions regarding the extent to which India will cooperate with America in containing China. Observers generally assume that India would like to get as many benefits as possible from the US but would not like to align itself completely with US priorities in its relations with other countries. The most prominent example of this is India's non-condemnation of Russian intervention in Ukraine.

On the other hand, in spite of the border dispute and other contentious issues with China, India realizes that it has an interdependent relationship with the former. Bilateral trade between the two countries reached "USD 135.98 billion in 2022"³⁸ despite "frosty relations",³⁹ and a significant part of this trade is

related to the supply chain related to technology, though according to recent reports, India is in the process of "devising a strategy to decrease its reliance on China for supply chains".⁴⁰ Thus, India will not be interested in completely spoiling its relations with China or entering into any direct or extreme dispute with Beijing just to appease the US. Nonetheless, the situation in the Indian Ocean is somewhat different.

Chinese Interests in IOR

China's interest in the Indian Ocean can be described under various heads. The significance of the IOR to Beijing can be gauged from the fact that most of China's energy supply routes are connected to the IOR. And it does not face any direct territorial disputes here like it has to in the case of the South China Sea. Thus to prevent any arising situation that may affect the SLOCs for its economic and strategic needs is extremely important to Beijing. In fact, this goal is directly linked to the BRI project as well, which, as indicated earlier, is one of China's most important goals to connect the world.

In this context, the Indian Ocean becomes a subject of extraordinary importance for China to increase its overall influence in the world. At the same time, the influence of the Indian Ocean on more than 50 littoral states provides extraordinary opportunities for China in the maritime economy and technology.

China's interest in the Indian Ocean is understandable, but precisely, these are the themes that compel China's adversaries on the global level and in the region to take an interest here, to contain it, besides, of course, pursuing individual country stakes. Deterring China in the Indian Ocean is, therefore, part of their policies and strategies.

³⁵ Sedef Akademir and Noam Ivri Adanani, "The G20s IMEC Initiative an Alternative Trade Corridor to China's Belt and Road Initiative," APCO Worldwide, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://apcoworldwide.com/blog/the-g20s-imec-initiative-an-alternative-trade-corridor-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

³⁶ Alex Gatopoulos, "Project Force: Is India a military superpower or a Paper Tiger?" Al Jazeera, accessed October 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/2/11/india-military-superpower-or-paper-tiger>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Although latest figures show a decline in economic activity and bilateral trade between both countries. The factors of this decline are not strategic. This is a reflection of the economic slowdown following Covid-19 pandemic and rising interest rates, and overall decline in China's trade and other regional factors. "India-China Trade Shows First Signs of Slowdown in Years," *The Times of India*, July 13, 2023, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/india-china-trade-shows-first-signs-of-slowdown-in-years/articleshow/101733165.cms?from=mdr>.

³⁹ "India-China Trade Climbs to USD 135.98 billion in 2022, Trade Deficit Crosses USD 100 billion for the First Time," January 13, 2023, *The Economic Times*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-china-trade-climbs-to-usd-135-98-billion-in-2022-trade-deficit-crosses-usd-100-billion-for-the-first-time/articleshow/96969775.cms>.

⁴⁰ "How India is Planning to Lower Reliance on China for Its Supply Chains; New Plan in Works," *The Times of India*, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://m.timesofindia.com/business/india-business/how-india-is-planning-to-lower-reliance-on-china-for-its-supply-chains-new-plan-in-works/articleshow/104669779.cms>.



On the other hand, despite conflicts with various countries, not letting trade and economy be affected as much as possible is also an important part of Chinese strategy. Therefore, be it America at the global level or India and other countries at the regional level, its trade with all countries is not only ongoing but also increasing. Under the umbrella of BRI itself, “[m]ore than 150 countries and over 30 international organizations have signed Belt and Road cooperation documents”.⁴¹

US-India Strategic Partnership in IOR

Due to the extraordinary significance of IOR and the increasing Chinese focus on it, there is no apparent conflict between the US and Indian interests in the Indian Ocean. It seems to be an important field of cooperation between them. The US shares the “strongest naval partnership in the wider Indian Ocean” with India. The US Department of Defense reported that military partnership and cooperation between the two allies had reached an “all-time high” in 2022.⁴² It is, therefore, not surprising that along with routine broader intelligence cooperation, both countries have agreed to monitor China’s economic and military activities in the wider Indian Ocean. Consequently, “India is building its naval assets and maritime surveillance capabilities to counter the growing footprints of China in the Indian Ocean Region”.⁴³

Both countries, with the help of littoral states in the Indian Ocean, are also working on developing a mechanism in the Indo-Pacific Region to get real-time information about the movement of ships.⁴⁴ On the other hand, naval exercises of the two countries – Japan has recently joined too – are also held annually in Malabar, an important location in the Indian Ocean,

to “balance” China’s growing naval arsenal and “assertiveness”. As Teshu Singh points out, “the larger geopolitics in the Malabar Exercise is the Indian, US and Japanese effort to balance China’s increasing naval assertiveness in the region”.⁴⁵ In 2015, the navies of the two countries conducted joint exercises to hunt submarines in the Indian Ocean.

One of the consequences of the extraordinary role of the Indian Ocean in world trade is that the waters here have become unusually crowded with ships. The number of ports and their associated coastal infrastructure is also increasing, instigating “a race to build ports in the Indian Ocean as China, India and others compete to secure their influence in the region”.⁴⁶ Therefore, different countries are competing to amass more space and bases to join in the race for control and supremacy in the IOR. And in this, not only the big powers but also the middle powers are active to their own extent.

In such a competitive environment, it is not strange to see that an arms race has started. Efforts are being made by various states to equip themselves for naval warfare (acquiring warships, helicopters, radar systems, submarines as well as joint war exercises, etc.).⁴⁷ There appears to be a race now to deploy submarines in the Indian Ocean by various countries.⁴⁸ Even nuclear submarines have also been added to this race.

Evolving Dynamics: Challenges and Opportunities

The above discussion explains the new grouping which is taking place in the world. In this new setting, the intense conflict between two sides in the form of direct or indirect confrontation is becoming quite

⁴¹ “(BRF2023) Full text of Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at 3rd Belt and Road Forum for Int’l Cooperation,” Xinhua, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20231018/7bfc16ac51d443c6a7a00ce25c972104/c.html>.

⁴² Jim Garamone, “U.S., India Ties Continue to Strengthen, Austin Says,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed October 22, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3170929/us-india-ties-continue-to-strengthen-austin-says/>.

⁴³ “India’s Efforts to Strengthen Indian Ocean Security,” Columbia-Harvard | China and the World Program, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://cwp.sipa.columbia.edu/news/indias-efforts-strengthen-indian-ocean-security-cwp-alum-manjari-chatterjee-miller>.

⁴⁴ Aparupa Bhattacharjee, ed., “The Maritime Great Game: India, China, US & The Indian Ocean,” Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/177823/SR150-IPCSSpecialFocus-MaritimeGreatGame.pdf>; and Nilanthi Samaranyake, Michael Connell, and Satu Limaye, “The Future of U.S.-India Naval Relations, Center for Naval Analyses,” February 2017, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/drm-2016-u-013938-final2.pdf.

⁴⁵ Teshu Singh, “The Malabar Exercises: India, Japan and the US,” Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, January 31, 2014, http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=4282.

⁴⁶ David Brewster, “Chabahar: India’s New Move in the Great Indian Ocean Port Race,” Lowy Institute, May 31, 2016, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chabahar-india-s-new-move-great-indian-ocean-port-race/>; and “Ports & Power in the Indian Ocean: How Naval Power, Porting Agreements, and Access will Shape the Future of the Indian Ocean,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, June 18, 2015, <https://amti.csis.org/ports-power-indian-ocean/>.

⁴⁷ Imran Raza and Nasir Mehmood, “Hypersonic Weapon Systems – A New Wave of Arms Race in the Indian Ocean Region,” *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 1 (2023): 28-39, <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.27.1.149>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.



visible. The war between Russia and Ukraine is the most prominent in this regard. The differences in dealing with the recent crisis in the Middle East (started October 7, 2023) between Hamas/Palestine and Israel also provide the same example. The organization of security cooperation in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), US moves and Chinese response to Taiwan, and various moves in relation to the dispute in the South China Sea are signs of continued security tensions. On the economic front, this confrontation has led to the de-dollarization moves and the establishment of new financial institutions (AIIDB, BRICS Development Bank, etc.) as multilateral cooperation mechanisms. All such developments will have a direct influence on developing collaborative strategies of the respective groups in the IOR as well.

But are there any opportunities to increase cooperation instead of competition in this environment of increasing tension?

It appears that while the competition between the global and major powers will continue, new opportunities are emerging for littoral states in this environment. Barring some exceptions in which some countries are interested in aligning with the US (and allies) under its leadership and others with China, most of these countries have the opportunity to negotiate better with the two groupings and try to achieve more objectives. Although China is not directly a part of the Indian Ocean like the US, its geographical proximity and historical status give it an edge over the US. The BRI's infrastructure projects have further strengthened its edge in that it currently has an advantage over the US and its Western and regional allies due to its "project management system", cohesive policies, and the availability of resources, "challenging the traditional model of multilateral infrastructure financing".⁴⁹

None of the Western initiatives match the magnitude and pace of implementation of BRI development and connectivity projects, "Western-led bilateral and plurilateral infrastructure and connectivity initiatives designed as alternatives have remained fragmented and have been dwarfed in scope and scale by a geographically and thematically rapidly expanding BRI...". Thus, a lot of collaboration will take place but within the fault lines of the overall political divisions.

Another area of collaboration is the possibility of the movement for better discipline and governance in the region. Since the need and potential for cooperation exist while a war-like scenario does not seem to be anyone's plan, the tensions would increase the chances of moving for a rule-based mechanism.

The non-traditional security threats (like climate change, natural disasters and transnational crimes) have also created pressures for mutual cooperation. Among the non-traditional security threats (NTS) climate change is leading to a vicious cycle where problems like overfishing, offshore pollution, and loss of habitat, in addition to natural disasters, are on the rise. The other NTS threats are related to the illegal and criminal activities of transnational organized and unorganized groups who are involved in human, drug, and arms trafficking, illegal migration, smuggling, unregulated exploitation of marine resources, and other transnational crimes.

These are issues in which the exchange of scientific information, technology and intelligence sharing, as well as strategic communication and joint research efforts, become increasingly important. The fact is that joint efforts not only provide an opportunity to de-escalate immediate challenges, but also help fill or bridge trust deficit and creates new possibilities for cooperation.

Conclusion

Although competition is an inherent trait of human nature, it leads to war and destruction if not founded on healthy principles and values. Human history is witness to it. While initiatives taken by China under the paradigm of shared destiny are getting popular, there appears to be little chance that the paradigm will replace the current paradigm of governance, which essentially promotes conflict. The way the alliances and groupings are being formed and global power competition is taking shape reflects this reality. Hence, along with a long-term and sustained effort to bring an overall change in the governing paradigm, both in theory and practice, specific steps are required in various domains.

We know that the economies, livelihoods and cultural identities of the states and people around IOR are vitally linked to it. We need to remind ourselves that the geopolitical boundaries are man-made, which the ocean does not recognize. As such, the ecosystems and

⁴⁹ "Towards a Joint Western Alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative?" European Parliamentary Research Service, December 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698824/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)698824_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698824/EPRS_BRI(2021)698824_EN.pdf).



much of their biodiversity are transboundary. Conflicts and clashes, instead of competitive exploitation for the collective good, are but a prescription of destruction for all. Developing a healthy competitive environment is inevitable to benefit from the new opportunities appearing not only in the established sectors but also in the new emerging sectors.

World oceans are internally connected and thus form a unit. In this context, in 2015, the UN decided on the SDGs under the development agenda and adopted goals 13 and 14 emphasizing ‘combat climate change’ and ‘conserve and sustainably use the oceans’. It was a recognition of the fact that oceans connect people and that all stakeholders need to work together and collaborate to realize their potential for collective growth. But the progress so far has been much below the mark in most cases. This only emphasizes the need to adopt robust collaborative strategies by all.⁵⁰

The maritime sector and blue economy are domains about which awareness is very low in most parts of the world. This is another important area of cooperation, which, although it will progress at its own pace, can be advanced even more rapidly through organized efforts.

For continuous, coordinated and proactive growth of the blue economy, a greater focus on marine-specific

policies, research and education; knowledge and information sharing; establishing mechanisms and networks; integrated planning on regional scales as well as within the countries; and robust governance involving industry, community and other stakeholders including the governments are required.

Above all, a shift in the paradigm of global governance is inevitable. A paradigm that should recognize that “Until today, Earth is still the only home to mankind, so to care for and cherish it, is the only option for us mankind. We should not only think about our own generation, but also take responsibility for future ones”,⁵¹ and that “only together we can effectively address climate change, marine pollution, biological conservation, and other global environmental issues.”⁵²

The above-referred quotes are a test for all those navigating the globe, and IOR is no exception as to what extent they are genuinely following the spirit behind these principles that reflect an urge for the common development of humanity. Therefore, collaboration and competition are vital to explore and tap the unlimited potential and resources of the world, let alone the whole universe. However, how to prevent the latter from transforming into full-blown conflicts and wars is a real challenge, for which great powers as well as middle powers need to make collective efforts for a “shared future” of humanity to achieve peace, prosperity and development.



⁵⁰ General Assembly Economic and Social Council, “Progress Towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet,” Report of the Secretary-General (Special Edition), May 2023, <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/SDG%20Progress%20Report%20Special%20Edition.pdf>; and “Climate Change Undermines Nearly All Sustainable Development Goals,” World Meteorological Organization, 14 September 2023, <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/climate-change-undermines-nearly-all-sustainable-development-goals>.

⁵¹ Keynote speech by the Chinese President Xi in the United Nations office at Geneva on January 18, 2017.

⁵² Ibid.

