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# Geopolitics In The Indian Ocean World And Sino-Indian Rivalry: A Conceptual Analysis

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Mujeeb Kanth\*

## Abstract

*This paper attempts to analyse Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean by focusing on the existing maritime practices in the Oceanic space as a departure point. It is argued that the peculiar nature of maritime interaction as a generator of political practices and the Oceans ability to transcend these practices allows a non-deterministic yet grounded approach to translating the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean World. To the latter end, the paper focuses on the political practices of China and India, associated with small Island states in the Indian Ocean. It is shown that a complex layering of law-and-order building/contestation animate the maritime competition between China and India in this multiplex region.*



## Introduction

It has been argued that IR is stuck in a territorial trap whereby at a conceptual level, it cannot take account of changes and phenomena taking place beyond the analytical constructs of 'borders' and 'state sovereignty'<sup>1</sup>. This has resulted in a problem of scaling, and

development of appropriate scales to understand various political practices taking place across and within, irrespective of bounded notions of territory, and concomitantly, 'geography' has been suggested as a remedial to this disciplinary deficiency<sup>2</sup>. In this context, the rationale for adopting an ocean-based analysis is evident wherein oceanic expanse provides a space that

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is scalable in its analytic properties and its ability to transcend these scales by allowing an understanding of the multi-scalar nature of impact and effects. As has been noted, sovereignty and territory inform the core assumptions of a territorial trap<sup>3</sup>; however, the understanding of territory and territorialisation has to be extended beyond the land terrain in order to properly account for the sovereign articulations of territoriality on land and their genesis in seascapes.

These practices, which are otherwise categorised as 'geopolitical anomalies'<sup>4</sup>, are very much a part of the historical articulation of sovereign power and maritime orders through the Oceanic spaces. Further, every understanding of human affairs mediated through a spatial ordering is structured by a metageography, wherein metageography informs or serves as a frame of relations- social, economic, and political<sup>5</sup>. To the extent that metageography is dependent on the subjective categorization of geophysical phenomenon<sup>6</sup>, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the epistemic range provided by a metageographic construction. However, while the subjective element is a necessary part of metageography, it informs concrete practices. Therefore, acknowledging metageography does not deny

spatial understandings or practices but rather highlights what is obscured by necessary limitations or reach of spatial understandings and practices. Given that the Indian Ocean is itself a metageography, it helps to lay out the spatial understanding of the geopolitical frame involved.

Firstly, the concept of geopolitics may be understood with reference to the power projection capacity over a physical space<sup>7</sup> and the extent to which this projection allows for a mechanism of control or generation of a regulatory framework of interaction in this space. This conception involves the spatial dimension of power as well as the ideas and perception<sup>8</sup>, which inform a spatial construction. Secondly, by virtue of the preceding practices, a region may be understood through concepts and practices which historically mediated this space. Finally, space need not be understood simply as surface or as a binary between water and land; rather, space is a dynamic entity that has both depth and height and different elemental aspects<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Geopolitical foundations of Sino-Indian rivalry***

Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean is taking place in the backdrop

of major power shifts and geopolitical changes underway since WWII but increasingly visible since the end of the cold war. In a world understood to be undergoing a power shift from Pax Americana to an increasingly Chinese-dominated international politics<sup>10</sup>, one commentator has termed it as a move towards a multiplex world order<sup>11</sup>. The peculiarity of this arrangement seems to be the notion that different political visions play out simultaneously in the international arena without the erstwhile polar configuration of the bygone cold war era<sup>12</sup>. What, however, is certain is that the erstwhile third world states have risen to political prominence, especially in the so-called Indo-Pacific region. Sino-Indian rivalry is seen as subject to the political practices of both the states in the oceanic space which are forging a new geopolitical arena in the Indian Ocean world. As a strategic concept, it tries to bridge the erstwhile cold war conceptual gap between South Asia and South East-Asia, and link up the west-Pacific with the Indian Ocean. Herein, under the rubric of Indo-Pacific, new geostrategic developments are perceived to be influencing the security practices of the two states. For He and Li, Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept is a recent induction into the strategic calculations of particular states<sup>13</sup>. Its

geographic rendition remains amorphous<sup>14</sup>, wherein its sea-continent dichotomy is visible in recent scholarship. Pardesi understands the Indo-Pacific as representing the geopolitical reality of Asia (except the brief period of Cold War) for last two centuries, which has a developed continental strategic space and an emerging oceanic frontier<sup>15</sup>, whereas for scholars such as Baogang, Indo-Pacific as a geographic space represents a predominantly oceanic space located at the intersection of two seas which reflects 'maritime/continental hybridity'<sup>16</sup>. However, as Scott has noted, Indo-Pacific is predominantly conceived as a maritime concept<sup>17</sup>. Indo-Pacific's institutionalisation, as Kai He argues, revolves around the way in which China is placed in its security construction<sup>18</sup>. Attesting also to the maritime practices of the two states, Sino-Indian rivalry, is argued to have been influenced, by the concept of the "string of pearls" highlighted first in the Booze Hamilton report<sup>19</sup>. It was an attempt at giving structure to Chinese naval activities in the Indian Ocean and accordingly indicating a possible future arc of security cooperation between New Delhi and Washington in the Indian Ocean space<sup>20</sup>. While India has noted Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean with concern, it persists in a

'hedging' behaviour as opposed to open confrontation in the form of balancing<sup>21</sup>. Thus a complex process of 'competing security constructions'<sup>22</sup> operates under this concept.

For our purposes, the concept of Indian Ocean World subsumes this configuration as one among the spatial understandings of the region. Accordingly, the paper focuses on the analysis of the understandings of India and China in the Indian Ocean world. The reason is twofold wherein firstly, the western perception of the emerging contest in this region is based on a narrative of the binary between land power and sea power<sup>23</sup>. Secondly, the agency which the new political geography of the region provides is qualitatively different in terms of power blocs, legal mechanisms, and interpretations of spatial interrelations in the region at large. Sino-Indian rivalry is situated centrally in this new political geography, and accordingly, their perspectives require us to do away with the sea/land binary as well as the epistemic rationale of their engagement with the region as dictated by western geopolitical primacy. While the insecurities of both India and China stem from their colonial past<sup>24</sup>, their political form and ideological set-up are markedly different from what was assumed 20

years ago, let alone over a century ago. This has implications for understanding the political geography of the region wherein, as Singh notes, sovereign states have different requirements as opposed to empires, and hence the relationship between frontiers and empires was fundamentally different in the erstwhile Qing and British Empires<sup>25</sup>. Herein, both states, while having territorial insecurity and resource requirements, the settlements which could be made between imperial formations are very difficult between sovereign states at the moment, given their susceptibility to mass public opinion and nationalist cartographic imaginary. Furthermore, with respect to resource extraction in their neighbourhood, both states have to appear legitimate in their extraterritorial practices, at least rhetorically and formally, given the postcolonial baggage and narratives which abound in their nationalist self-conception and regional approaches.

### ***Ocean as a 'method' or the political geography of 'Terra nullius'***

Mancke has argued that oceanic, as opposed to terrestrial dominance, was characteristic of European empires in Asia and Africa. It was mastery of the ocean space which

allowed the Europeans to establish a foothold in littoral Asia and Africa, which then made it possible to attempt limited campaigns in the interior of these continents. Accordingly, the oceanic dynamic of European empires differed significantly from other seafaring nations in their notions of political order and sovereignty. Secondly, the control of these empires extended from the sea towards the littoral, however never penetrating the depth beyond the littoral in both Asia and Africa. Finally, the maritime interaction of these empires engendered major changes in how international relations would be conducted, including, among others, a mechanism to ensure 'order stability' based on mutual obligations, sovereign equality, and jurisdictional dimensions of ocean connectivity. The major difference between land-based empires of Asia and those of the thalassocracies of Europe was their attempts at control and regulation of the oceanic space. This aspect of European empires was central to the practices and concepts that developed in the ocean space in that it resulted in the politicisation of the ocean space. Further, as Mancke notes, the contest for the control of the ocean is not over, and the control over erstwhile colonial outposts in the shape of Islands remains central to European power and dominance.

These islands serve as military bases, choke points and importantly provide a 'legitimate' recourse to extraterritorial share in ocean resources to European powers.<sup>26</sup>

Elden notes, geopolitics includes both understandings of terra: narrowly as land and comprehensively as including the sea space<sup>27</sup>. Then geopolitics involves both these elements of terra<sup>28</sup>. Further, Philips has shown that territorialisation proceeds under the ocean as well, highlighting the way in which offshore drilling and resource extraction are themselves a process of territorialisation of the ocean<sup>29</sup>. Given the nature of International law, especially the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) of 1982, islands have become custodians of resources beyond their control, and further maritime regionalism and security are centrally concerned with these resources and the islands' space (deep water and dryland). Then the approach adopted here shall take Islands as central to the spatial exercise of power in the Indian Ocean world. The military potential and resource access of the islands is such that it makes the analytical observation of geopolitical competition possible. As regards the military potential of Islands, Vine, with regards to the US, states that

extraterritorial bases facilitate wars overseas and may be central to the continuous warfare in which the US is involved<sup>30</sup>. Many of the overseas bases are small Island holdings, and many are in the Indian Ocean and not just of the US. Further, as Steinberg states, oceans are not only a means of connectivity but have also come to be seen as a resource themselves such that it is engendering practices aimed at demarcation and territorial closure such that a system of management may be set up<sup>31</sup>. Thus practices surrounding these island states (many of whom became independent) are central to understanding spatial control and resource exploitation in the Ocean.

### ***Political Geographies of the Indian Ocean World: Past in Perspective***

Ocean basin studies have revealed that practices of western imperial polities in the ocean space have been central to the construction of a regime of laws governing maritime interaction and the political practice of sovereignty in their imperial domains. Oceans are bound up in both order making<sup>32</sup>, and imperial ventures of the Europeans<sup>33</sup>. As Pijl has noted, the west emerged as a frontier formation that took the claim to universal sovereignty along with

it, and its maritime supremacy or the conquest of oceans provided the material base for its prosperity<sup>34</sup>. Another important practice that allowed structuring of the order in the ocean was piracy on the high seas<sup>35</sup>. Specifically, the changing fortunes of Portuguese and Spanish empires were directly affected by the new entrants in the ocean space, namely British, Dutch, and the French<sup>36</sup>. In order to forestall any further such changes, the British proceeded by internalizing maritime security in the Indian Ocean to safeguard its imperial holdings in the region<sup>37</sup>. It is necessary here to develop an understanding of the region to make sense of Indian Ocean legacies. Firstly, as Sugata Bose points out, the Indian Ocean is characterised as an interregional arena as opposed to a system or a particularistic region<sup>38</sup>. However, while acknowledging cultural and economic ties that bind this arena, it is necessary to extend the meaning of this interregional arena in a more spatially complex direction, which perhaps results in the reduction of agency that Bose embeds the human geographies of the region in. Herein, it is necessary to note that the institution of a legal regime to criminalise piracy<sup>39</sup> and monopolisation of violence on the high seas<sup>40</sup> played an important part in defining the strategic conceptions which shaped the region. A major

practice as a consequence established through the European venture, especially that of the British in the Indian Ocean world, was that the ocean space had to be mastered so as to stake a claim to order building in the region. This European legacy would carry on beyond formal decolonisation into the contemporary era.

It is necessary to briefly account for the nature of this colonial order with reference to piracy as well as territorialisation of the ocean connectivity. This aspect of the colonial order highlights how control over movement and redefinition of practices would end up shaping notions of maritime regionalism and maritime security in the contemporary ocean space. Herein, notions of non-traditional security threats, among them terrorism and freedom of navigation, figure prominently in contemporary literature on maritime security and maritime regionalism. As Bose has argued, the colonial state from the 19th century onwards began to increasingly redefine the practice of piracy as criminal and noting Curzon's imperial voyages sought to push a vision of the past which was characterized by chaos and barbarity, which was ameliorated by the arrival of British naval supremacy in the region<sup>41</sup>. Further, as Dua citing

Armitage, has noted, the British notion of monopolization of violence in the ocean sought to perpetuate the justification of the normative myth of order building in the region<sup>42</sup>. The territorialisation of ocean connectivity then may be understood as the setting up strategic connections and bases which guarded major trade routes and sea lanes of communication, i.e., the militarization of the ocean space<sup>43</sup> (Mancke, 1999). From the brutal Portuguese Cartaz system<sup>44</sup> to the establishment of protectorates around the Gulf of Aden and Malacca straits<sup>45</sup>, the genesis of order building/ maritime regionalism in the colonial period was then akin to the setting up of a novel biopolitical regime in the ocean space.

On the other hand, as Benton<sup>46</sup>, Benton & Ford<sup>47</sup>, and Mancke<sup>48</sup> have noted, the need for a legal regime was also necessitated by increasing maritime interaction and the need to deal with interstate conflict on the high seas. Further, as Steinberg notes, the dividing lines such as Tordesillas and the Papal Bull were premised on the notion of jurisdictional responsibilities as opposed to the territorial appropriation of the seas even if it may aid in the latter<sup>49</sup>. Accordingly, he prescribes a notion of stewardship in acts of division and demarcation in the ocean space<sup>50</sup>. This brings out a persistent feature of the

Indian Ocean World, an increasingly jurisdictional space for international law. This has significantly shaped international relations since then, wherein new laws, especially the UNCLOS of 1982 (dealt in the next section), structure the political space of the Indian Ocean World. Furthermore, as Gommans has noted with respect to the early Indian Ocean world, there was a constant circulation of ideas in the Indian Ocean World<sup>51</sup>, and this holds in contemporary times with respect to the practice of sovereignty and resource claims. Finally, a pre-colonial condition that characterised the Indian Ocean World is somewhat instructive for present times; this is captured in the notion of Order in Diversity<sup>52</sup>, which is the existence of different political forms in the Indian Ocean even after the appearance of the European seafaring expeditions. For our purposes, we may note that the current Indian Ocean world is also characterised by diversity in the scale of political forms, albeit with the caveat of an overarching frame of international law.

***Lawfare, Territorialisation and Small States: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indian Ocean World***

The Indian Ocean is now regarded as a space for competing regional

security constructions<sup>53</sup>, and the allure of the ocean for India and China in this region comes from an order building imperative which in the first instance requires that an aspiring power attunes the interests of a spatial configuration to its own interests. There are various layers to this configuration, including ecological concerns, terrorism, blue economy, and great power rivalry. For our purposes to put the analysis in perspective, we begin by noting the way in which UNCLOS of 1982 has shaped the Indian Ocean space. The UNCLOS of 1982 established the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), which extend to around 200 nautical miles from the shoreline of the state in question<sup>54</sup>. The member states of the Indian Ocean have a combined total area of 26.8 million sq. km of EEZ; furthermore, a combined grouping of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) member states and dialogue partners comprises around 45.49 per cent of the global EEZ's<sup>55</sup>. However, it has an area that exceeds these national boundaries set up by UNCLOS and is theoretically free for exploitation by anyone<sup>56</sup>. Associated accordingly with this is the notion of blue economy and maritime security wherein scholars note that they are both inextricably linked and secondly that the scope of conventional maritime naval activity extends to encompass a wide variety

of activities which include protection of EEZ's, ecological security, and human security on and in the ocean<sup>57</sup>. However, as noted in the above sections, maritime security and regionalism are very much a product of imperial ordering practices, and taking an uncritical approach to these obscures the actual impact of these practices. As Dua has noted, contestations over piracy and protection was a mode of expansion of European influence to the detriment of local powers<sup>58</sup>, and in a contemporary vein, commentators look upon dealing with non-traditional security as central to the prevention of an order being hijacked by an 'external' power<sup>59</sup>. Then the regional projects of both China and India are attempts at territorialisation of ocean spaces (though currently uncertain). Island states figure prominently in this for many reasons, but primarily based on sovereign rights to resource extraction and the use of their terra for military purposes. This compels a cooperative as well as a competitive dynamic which affects their development and freedom of manoeuvre in international politics. So accordingly, we find a hedging strategy adopted by many of these states to moderate the influence of Sino-Indian rivalry on their developmental prospects<sup>60</sup>. Herein, we see the spaces for military exercises and security being

extended to both actors in the islands' territorial extent. Although the Island states do attempt an independent approach such as the futile Maldivian attempt to shrug off dependence on India, these turn to difficult considerations in the power balance in the region and do really succeed<sup>61</sup>. Blue Economy remains central to the interests of Small Island Developing States (SIDS)<sup>62</sup>, whereas for IORA managing the extra-national common resources in the region seems to be a priority<sup>63</sup>. This very much revolves around the question of who will be the net security provider and capacity generator in the region, in so far as India is concerned<sup>64</sup>. Due to the complex post-colonial political geography of the region, there are several challenges to IORA, which geopolitically appears to be a mechanism of establishing a consensus over the order sustaining role of India, among them the Asia/Africa divide<sup>65</sup> and consensus-building failures regarding bilateral issues which impinge on its objectives<sup>66</sup> but most importantly, the China-led regional initiative of BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). In this, Islands figure prominently in both Indian and Chinese perspectives and their calculations about each other and the ocean space. As far as China is concerned, Pillsbury has noted that major Chinese strategic fears stem

from a perception of encirclement through island chains and China responds to these structuring its military and strategic choices<sup>67</sup> on the basis of this spatial understanding of Islands in the ocean space. Accordingly, Indian Ocean ports and Islands are very much understood here as providing a way out of this strategic dilemma. The threat perception associated with islands and their strategic value stems, as Scott has argued, from their nature as missile and aircraft stationing spaces and as forward deployment areas for troops (possibly for littoral combat)<sup>68</sup>. The Indian Ocean occupies a central place in the Indian vision of order<sup>69</sup>, and a similar strategic insecurity logic of encirclement is prevalent in Indian strategic discourse over the Indian Ocean World. The Indian government is perceptive of the dual nature of maritime security and the prime minister of India has stated in his SAGAR Vision that India would “*cooperate, not compete in responding to the challenges in the seas*”<sup>70</sup>. It is important here to take into account the changing strategic perception of maritime security among Indian scholars who have moved away from a horizontal and critical consideration of militarization of the Indian Ocean<sup>71</sup> to a full-fledged order building maritime vision<sup>72</sup>. What underlies this change in perception seems to be a reckoning

with conventional geopolitical theories of Mahan and Mackinder<sup>73</sup> noticeably in the recovery of the maritime approach underlined by India’s own naval strategist K. M. Panikkar. As Chaturvedi writes:

Despite diplomat-historian K M Panikkar’s reminder of India’s glorious maritime past, the ‘continental mindset’ and ‘narrowness of coastal cultures’ characterised India’s image of itself, shaped the world-view of political elites for nearly five decades after independence and seriously undermined the pursuit of India’s maritime destiny and duty – Dharma at Sea – through a national maritime strategy.....The long due rejuvenation of India’s multiscalar – geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic – engagement with the Indian Ocean is taking place at a time when global geopolitics itself is becoming increasingly ocean-basin centric.<sup>74</sup>

This is directly linked to the perceived activities and objectives of China in the region:

China seems to have proved Mearsheimer right by aggressively asserting the impulses of offensive

realism in and around the South China Sea, which, in some ways, seems to be at odds with the proclaimed objectives of OBOR.<sup>75</sup>

Hence, scholarly perceptions of maritime security in the Indian Ocean have transformed from a concern with global military pollution of the ocean space<sup>76</sup> to order building necessity for maritime security via the centrality of Indian naval assets<sup>77</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

What does Ocean as a method hold for the study of maritime regionalism in the contemporary Indian Ocean World? For one, it brings out genealogies of political practices and connections which have shaped and are implicit in the current spatial configurations of the region. It has specifically focused on practices of

territorialisation in the ocean space. Secondly, by deploying an ocean-centric framework, our analysis has benefitted from the recognition of generative capabilities of practices in ocean spaces. Thirdly it has allowed us to put in perspective contemporary spatial relations, which are necessary to avoid the pitfalls of the otherwise western-centric geopolitical narratives. As Guyot-Récharé observes, modern-day India and China usually fail to acknowledge their own imperial practices in the frontier regions<sup>78</sup>, and this arguably holds true for their Indian Ocean ventures. The above analysis points us towards the fact that Sino-Indian rivalry is moving in the direction of sharper access and denial geopolitics. But the complexity of territorial regimes configured by International law and specifically UNCLOS of 1982 has so far delicately moulded this geopolitics. ■

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