



**CARNEGIE**  
ENDOWMENT FOR  
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

---

Congressional Testimony

---

**Surrounding the Ocean: PRC influence  
in the Indian Ocean**

**Darshana M. Baruah**

Fellow

South Asia Program

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Testimony before the House of Representatives  
Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the  
Indo-Pacific

April 18, 2023

Chair Kim, Ranking Member Bera, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today on China and its influence in the Indian Ocean.

I welcome today's hearing, and the subcommittee's commitment to understanding the wider Indian Ocean region. This topic has been the focus of my research since launching the Indian Ocean Initiative at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2021.<sup>1</sup> During today's hearing, I'll give an overview of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region, China's growing presence, and the state of U.S. relations in the region. I will close with a few recommendations for Congress to consider.

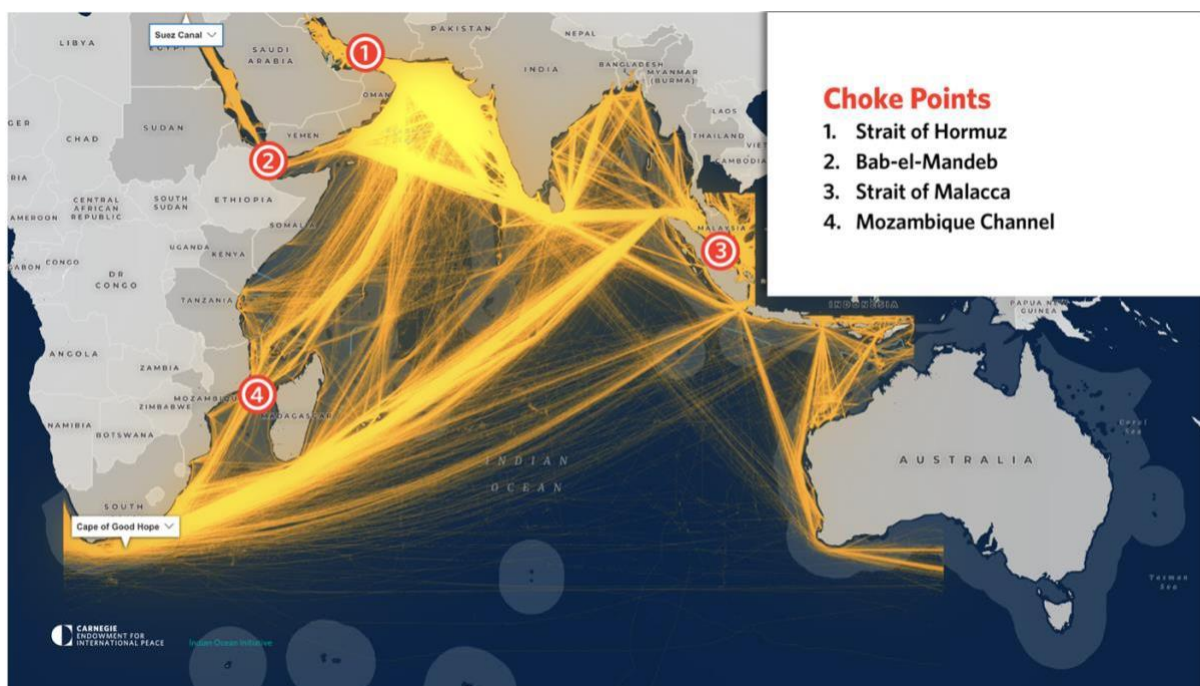
### **An Overview of the Indian Ocean**

One of the biggest challenges to understanding the Indian Ocean today is the continental division of a maritime domain. Traditionally, the Indian Ocean is divided into subregions with dominant continental focus such as South Asia, Middle East, and Africa. The Indian Ocean, within the U.S. Department of State is viewed through the Bureaus of African Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, and South and Central Asian Affairs. The maritime domain and its developments therein exist on the periphery of the geopolitical and strategic conversations within this construct. An accentuated challenge is categorizing island nations in the region into continental silos. For example, Sri Lanka is studied as part of South Asia and Seychelles as part of Africa, but South Asia and Africa would identify primary challenges significantly different than islands that are surrounded by the ocean on all four sides while sitting across key trading routes. A study of the maritime domain requires a maritime approach. My work through the Indian Ocean Initiative studies and assesses the Indian Ocean as one continuous theater and its implications on the Indo-Pacific.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Indian Ocean Initiative Launch," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 14, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/14/indian-ocean-initiative-launch-event-7682>

The Indian Ocean is a critical trade route. It includes some of the world's most strategically important chokepoints, particularly energy shipping. For example, the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important chokepoints for oil transit, connects the Persian Gulf and the Middle East to Asia, Europe, and Africa via the Indian Ocean. The ocean is also home to Bab-el-Mandeb situated between the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and the Suez Canal. It is a key transit route for goods and energy between Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, all via the Indian Ocean. Finally, the chokepoint that coined the phrase "Malacca Dilemma" is the strait of Malacca connecting Southeast and Northeast Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe via the Indian Ocean.

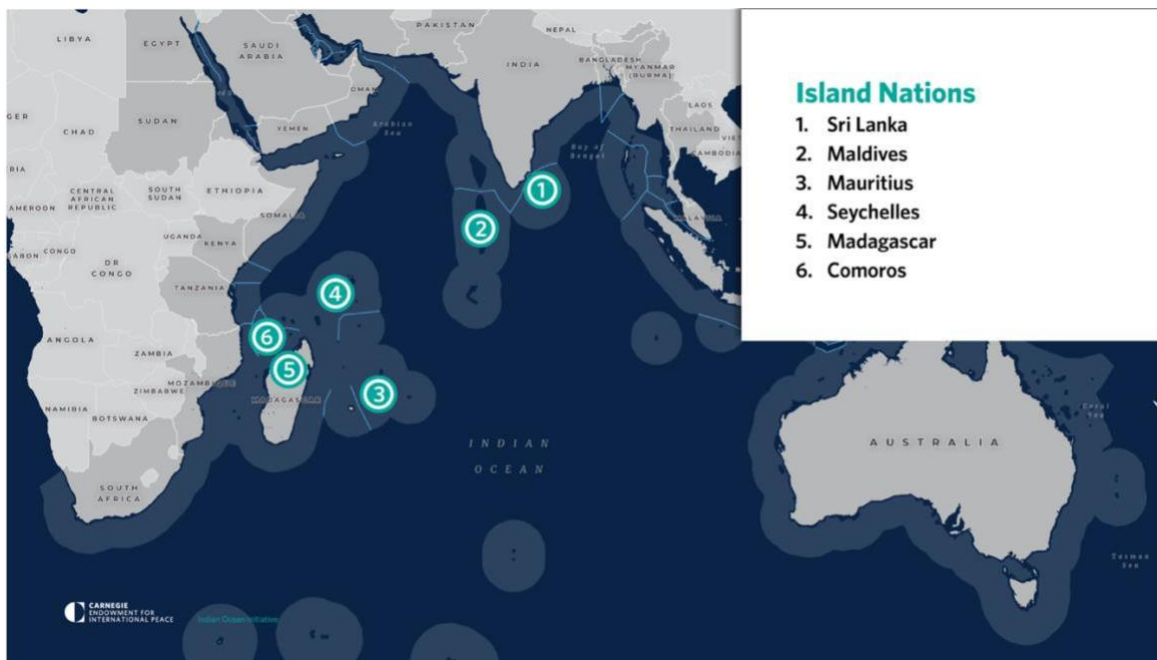


China relies on a safe, secure, and stable Indian Ocean for trade, with a particular focus on energy. Nine of China's top ten crude oil suppliers transit the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is also the primary theater of transit for China for engagements with Africa, Middle East, island nations, and littorals across the vast ocean. Going beyond, it is also the main trading route between China and Europe. China's interest in the Indian Ocean is therefore clear, at least on the

economic side. As history will tell us, the flag follows trade. There is little doubt in the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean for China and this interest will only continue to grow.

### China in the Indian Ocean

China has growing interests in the Indian Ocean. Although Beijing is considered a new player in the region, China has had long-standing political and diplomatic ties with many littorals across the Indian Ocean. For example, China is the only nation with an embassy in each of the six islands in the Indian Ocean—Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros. None of the traditional players—the United States, the UK, India, or France have embassies on all six. China also does not have any standing territorial or sovereignty disputes in the Indian Ocean, whereas the U.S., the UK, and France have long-standing sovereignty disputes emerging from decolonization. Beijing is often considered a welcome player and an alternative in the region. China has built on its diplomatic and political presence in the region to strong military and economic partnership across all littorals in the Indian Ocean—from the eastern coast of Africa to the littorals of the Indian Ocean. This role as a credible and emerging security and economic partner can perhaps be viewed as a new role Beijing seeks to play in the Indian Ocean.



Beyond diplomatic and trade partnerships, Beijing has begun a consistent military presence in the region. Starting in 2008, Beijing began to deploy its navy for anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. This effort is consistent with deployments from many major players toward securing a critical trade route and providing wider security to the region. This military presence has allowed for growing interactions with many littorals in the region, as China consistently began to sail from the Western Pacific to the Horn of Africa across the Indian Ocean. In 2014, China first deployed submarines to the region in support of its antipiracy mission. Whether subsurface vessels are a required military asset in responding to maritime piracy can be debated. However, the presence provides the opportunity and space for Beijing to do so while making port calls in Indian Ocean nations, such as Sri Lanka.

This military presence gives China additional capacity and influence during crises. For example, in 2014, China responded quickly to a water crisis in Male, in Maldives, despite being a non-Indian Ocean nation.<sup>2</sup> Although India was the first to provide assistance to Maldives, China followed soon after, establishing its responsiveness in times of crisis. Similarly, Beijing had offered crew and assistance in the rescue operations of MH370, the Malaysian Airlines flight that disappeared in 2014.<sup>3</sup> China's offer for help was to search the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean. In 2015, China evacuated its citizens<sup>4</sup> and foreign nationals from Yemen displaying its ability again to respond to crisis as well as carry out evacuation missions far from its near seas. The vast geographic space that constitutes the Indian Ocean welcomes several players and their resources and capacities in addressing emerging challenges. China's ability to demonstrate and sustain a presence during periods of crisis in the region is a building block toward establishing itself as a productive and capable player.

A key aspect to establishing interest and commitment to a region is by demonstrating presence, particularly physical presence. In order for China to present itself as a credible player

---

<sup>2</sup> "Chinese Government Provides Emergency Assistance to Maldives," Relief Web, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, December 7, 2014, <https://reliefweb.int/report/maldives/chinese-government-provides-emergency-assistance-maldives>

<sup>3</sup> "Missing Malaysia Plane: Chinese Territory Searched," NEWS, BBC, last modified March 18, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26609569>

<sup>4</sup> "Yemen Crisis: China Evacuates Citizens and Foreigners From Aden," NEWS, BBC, last modified April 3, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32173811>

with interests in the region, Beijing would need to demonstrate an ability to operate and sustain itself in the Indian Ocean. To that effort, China in 2017 opened its first ever overseas military facility in the Indian Ocean, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. In January 2022,<sup>5</sup> Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, flew to Moroni, the capital of Comoros for bilateral talks with his counterpart. China is perhaps one of the few nations, if not only, to send high-level delegation and visits to the island of Comoros, a strategically located nation but widely neglected by the international community. The island of Comoros sits on the northern mouth of the Mozambique Channel, a critical waterway and a primary route for transit should the Suez Canal or the Bab-El-Mandeb be inaccessible. Situated between Madagascar, Mozambique, and Kenya, Comoros could be the key to the Indian Ocean, much like the Solomon Islands in the Pacific.

China has been consistent in its engagements with countries across the Indian Ocean from the littoral nations to the islands. China is also one of the few nations who likely views the Indian Ocean as one continuous zone, perhaps due to its need to secure its sea lines of communication running across the ocean to Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. A second Chinese military facility in the Indian Ocean is a matter of time and not “if.” While it is widely speculated that China’s second military facility could likely come up in the eastern Indian Ocean potentially in Myanmar or Pakistan, my research points toward the western Indian Ocean. The western Indian Ocean is the missing conversation in Indian Ocean geopolitics, particularly in Washington, DC, which carry a lot of strategic, geographic, economic, and military significance.

### **The U.S. in the Indian Ocean <sup>6</sup>**

Under Indo-Pacific strategy, the Indian Ocean is geographically defined as per priorities of the nation. The United States geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific does not include the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *Wang Yi Holds Talks with Comorian Foreign Minister Dhoihir Dhoukama*, January 7, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2913\\_665441/2939\\_663884/2941\\_663888/202201/t20220108\\_10480237.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/2939_663884/2941_663888/202201/t20220108_10480237.html)

<sup>6</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, “Showing Up Is Half The Battle: U.S. Maritime Forces in The Indian Ocean,” Texas National Security Review, March 18, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/showing-up-is-half-the-battle-u-s-maritime-forces-in-the-indian-ocean/>

western Indian Ocean or the eastern coast of Africa, even though they are key components of Indian Ocean geopolitics. As I previously mentioned, the first Chinese overseas base built in the Indian Ocean was in Djibouti. However, when viewed through the lens of U.S. strategy, it would be labeled perhaps as an Africa development and sits outside of the United States' purview of the Indo-Pacific. Australia has a similar definition of the Indo-Pacific, whereas India and Japan's definition of the Indo-Pacific includes the Indian Ocean in its entirety, as do European nations such as France and Germany with an Indo-Pacific outlook.

While the U.S. has maintained a sizable presence in the Indian Ocean, its resources, capacity and attention naturally have been directed toward continental conflicts and priorities. In terms of the geographic significance of the Indian Ocean in U.S. strategic calculations, the Indian Ocean has been and will remain a critical theater for engagements in Africa, Middle East, and Afghanistan. Whether it be the Gulf wars or Afghanistan, the U.S. military has utilized the Indian Ocean to reach its critical subregions. Perhaps the most significant U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean is its joint military facility with the UK on Diego Garcia, in the Chagos Archipelago.<sup>7</sup> However, the U.S. military also uses the Indian Ocean as a transit route between its 5<sup>th</sup> fleet based in Bahrain and the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet in Japan.

The division of the Indian Ocean into continental silos and the Defense Department's separation of the theater into three combatant commands—INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM—undermines the maritime developments in the region. Of the three commands, INDOPACOM has the largest naval resources and capacity to understand and respond to maritime developments in the Indian Ocean. However, INDOPACOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR) ends with India, leaving a large portion of the Indian Ocean out of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategic purview. If there truly is a competition with China, then the U.S. is not paying particular attention to China's interests, vulnerabilities, and opportunities in the Indian Ocean.

---

<sup>7</sup> The sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago is disputed between the UK and Mauritius. In February of 2019 the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion stating that the UK's expulsion of the people of the Chagos Islands in the 1970's was against international law and that the UK must end its administration of the islands within six months. The UN General Assembly followed suit by adopting a resolution calling for Mauritius' decolonization. See *Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius*, Advisory Opinion, [2019] ICJReports 169

At this point, there is perhaps no nodal point, either in the Department of State or Defense, that is studying or monitoring developments across the Indian Ocean as one geographic space.

Given the Pacific is the primary theater for U.S. interests and understandably so, partnerships play a critical role in Washington's understanding and presence in the Indian Ocean. India is a key partner for U.S. engagements and opportunities across the region. Beyond India, Washington should also work with France—a key player in the domain. There are also trilateral partnerships between Washington's friends such as India-Australia and France, all with coasts and island territories in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. is also part of multiple forums and initiatives in the region such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association. The U.S. also has a liaison officer at the New Delhi-based Information Fusion Centre and is part of the Quad's Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness. These are all productive regional engagements. There is scope for better engagement in the Indian Ocean through these existing platforms and partnerships that Washington can leverage to its strategic benefit. However, to determine Washington's priorities and engagements in the region, it must first study and examine the Indian Ocean within its own strategic calculations. This effort will help define a framework and identify key players and partners for engagements and interactions to secure and stabilize the United States' presence and interests in the Indian Ocean.

## **Recommendation**

### ***1. An Indian Ocean Strategy***

Perhaps the last written Indian Ocean strategy dates to the mid 1970's. The 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy, a 20-page document, mentions the Indian Ocean twice, once in reference to geography and the other in reference to India. Even within that, the wider Indian Ocean is left out. To identify Washington's implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy in the Indian Ocean, there needs to be first a study examining the region against US interests, priorities, and competition in light of Washington's problems, challenges, and opportunities in the Indian Ocean. In order to do that, there is a need to study the Indian Ocean



in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, its chokepoints, its geography, littorals, island agency, and new players. To that effect, I recommend Congress to ask for a national security strategy on the Indian Ocean region.

## *2. Maximizing Existing Resources*

A presence in the Indian Ocean does not mean added burden or capacity constraints on U.S. forces in the region. As mentioned above, the U.S. is already present in the Indian Ocean, however most of its resources are directed toward continental challenges. As some of those are redefined whether in Afghanistan or in the Middle East, they can be rerouted or redirected toward the maritime domain. I recommend Congress ask for a study on existing resources in the Indian Ocean from the eastern coast of Africa to the Strait of Malacca and examine its utilization for needs and gaps in the maritime domain. This way, the U.S. will be able to maximize its existing presence and assets without necessarily drawing on resources from other theaters such as the Pacific.

## *3. Presence*

The clearest mark of interest is presence. The U.S. should again maximize its visits to the region, both diplomatic and military. As mentioned above, the U.S. military regularly transits in the Indian Ocean, so there exists an opportunity to utilize these deployments by conducting port calls and passing exercises in littorals and islands in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. should send diplomatic visits to countries across the Indian Ocean with a view to understanding the maritime domain, whether it is illegal fishing, maritime piracy, climate change, maritime domain awareness, or anti-submarine warfare. I would also recommend an examination of U.S. diplomatic presence across the Indian Ocean and in particular on island nations. While the U.S. has announced opening a new embassy in Maldives, in Madagascar there is one embassy accredited to four countries—Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Comoros—both in diplomatic and military capacities.

Finally, I recommend continued examination of the Indian Ocean, including of the western Indian Ocean in U.S. understanding of the Indo-Pacific, Washington's priorities, and geostrategic competition.