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**Evolving Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean:  
A Primer from India**

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### **Abstract**

The Sapru House Paper, titled “Evolving Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean: A Primer from India” focuses on the evolving geopolitics in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). It argues that given the role and importance of military presence of major powers in the region, WIO has emerged as a key fulcrum of 21<sup>st</sup> century international politics. Two broad themes run through this paper: rivalries between major powers and the enduring strategic importance of the location of the WIO. In the context of these two themes, the paper considers military presence including bases of major powers, non-traditional security challenges facing the WIO and the role of key regional organisations. The paper views the unfolding geopolitics of WIO from an Indian perspective and is interested in the implications of regional geopolitics on India’s foreign policy and national security. The paper considers India as a major stakeholder in the WIO and hence, redefines the geography of WIO.

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## I. Introduction

As the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) attains centre-stage in the geopolitics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) has emerged as a key political and strategic theatre.<sup>1</sup> WIO could be defined as a region lying between the Suez Canal, South Africa and Oman and includes littoral, and island states located in this expansive space. The Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea along with their respective littorals on the Northern Indian Ocean are also part of the overall geo-strategic calculations of the WIO.<sup>i</sup> The Red Sea, through the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb and Suez Canal, is a key entry point for WIO. Landlocked states (like South Sudan) which depend on the littoral states of WIO for their international trade and maritime connectivity could also be considered as part of the ‘broader WIO’ region. Thus, the region consists of more than twenty states<sup>ii</sup>, many of whom are politically volatile; is home to key waterways such as the Gulf of Aden; boasts of rapidly growing economies like Ethiopia; and most importantly, now hosts fast-expanding military bases of major powers. The WIO is significant for the world economy as it plays a key role in shipping energy resources through the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb and Hormuz and links growing economies of Asia with Europe.

For India, the WIO has obvious salience in part for historical reasons and also because external trade traversing through this maritime space forms an increasingly larger fraction of its GDP. The region includes India’s maritime neighbours and its extended neighbourhood. WIO also forms the western flank of the unifying geostrategic space of the Indo-Pacific region, which extends from the eastern African seaboard to the western Pacific, and, owing to the growing array of security threats facing the region such as maritime piracy, terrorism, and major power rivalries, is now considered as one of the most important geopolitical hotspots.

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<sup>i</sup>It needs to be noted that, from India’s strategic considerations, the Persian Gulf is an extension of the Western Indian Ocean security complex. Energy dependence and the presence of a large expatriate community are key drivers for India’s engagement and interest in the Persian Gulf. However, this paper does not touch upon the geopolitics within the Persian Gulf including the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, tensions between US and Iran, etc. A separate study is required to map and analyze India’s interests in and association with the Gulf.

<sup>ii</sup> **List of countries that are part of the WIO (littoral and island states):** Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, Mauritius, Oman, Iran, Pakistan, Maldives and India (West Coast). **Land-locked states:** South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Eswatini, Lesotho, Eastern DRC and Zambia.

## **II. The Argument**

The WIO is home to military bases of powers like the United States (US), France and China. With Russia announcing recently that it is establishing a base in Sudan, it is clear that the geopolitics of the region is heating up. Rivalries between West Asian powers are also being played out in the WIO. As a result, the region is experiencing complex, multi-layered contests between competing powers with regional affairs are getting linked with the global power politics. The paper argues that given the growing role and importance of the military presence of major powers in the region, WIO has emerged as a key fulcrum of 21<sup>st</sup> century international politics. The paper is an attempt to explain the growing importance of the region and looks at various actors and their respective activities in the region. The attempt is to draw attention to the changing geopolitics of the region as it is unfolding.

Two broad themes run through this paper: rivalries between major powers and the enduring strategic importance of the location of WIO. In the context of these two themes, the paper considers military presence including bases of major powers, non-traditional security challenges facing the WIO and key regional organisations. The paper views the unfolding geopolitics of WIO from an Indian perspective and is interested in the implications of its regional geopolitics on India's foreign policy and national security. The paper considers India as a major stakeholder in the WIO and hence, redefines the geography of WIO.

### ***Power Rivalries***

Rivalries between major powers have emerged as an essential feature of the regional geopolitics of the WIO. Major powers including China, France and the US are actively involved in enhancing and consolidating their multi-faceted presence and military reach in the region. They have made efforts to ensure some sort of permanent military footprint in the WIO and have expanded the scope of their military facilities manifold. Regular military presence - for anti-piracy, counter-terror and maritime security operations, defence diplomacy including the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) efforts and naval exercises in the region - project the growing power and interest of these countries.

By expanding their activities and engagements, the major powers seek to gain relative advantage over their challengers and attempt to limit space for the influence of their adversaries. For this, smaller yet strategically located states such as Djibouti and Seychelles were, and even now continue to be, courted and cajoled. States like Sudan and Eritrea have worked this newfound attention by major powers to their advantage while a conflict-ridden

state like Yemen has faced major adverse effects of the evolving geopolitical rivalries. Power rivalries between major players have been a constant feature of WIO since the 1970s and they have further intensified in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is likely that as the Indo-Pacific rivalry between the US and China sharpens, the role of WIO is likely to assume even greater importance.

### ***Enduring Strategic Importance of the Location of WIO***

The WIO is strategically located at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, attracts major powers to the region. It is close to the energy heartland of the world i.e. West Asia and the sea lanes passing through the region are critical for global energy security. Multiple maritime chokepoints such as the Bab-el-Mandeb, the straits of Hormuz, the Mozambique Channel and the Cape of Good Hope are located within the WIO. For the closed geography of the Indian Ocean, these chokepoints are also key entry and exit points. Apart from these four, one more chokepoint i.e. Suez Canal is also important for the geopolitics of WIO. These five chokepoints are vital for the international trade and security of the sea lanes passing through the region and have a direct impact on the global economy.

The location of WIO is crucial in the context of resource security as well. The region between Somalia and Mozambique is emerging as a new energy hotspot and states like South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe are rich in strategic minerals like uranium, copper, platinum, and gold. A substantive presence in the WIO ensures access to these and other resources and consequently, interests major powers to these countries. Emerging areas like the development of the blue economy, seabed mining and coastal welfare are likely to further increase the importance of the WIO. Therefore, the growing strategic importance of the WIO owing to its location is a major feature of international politics.

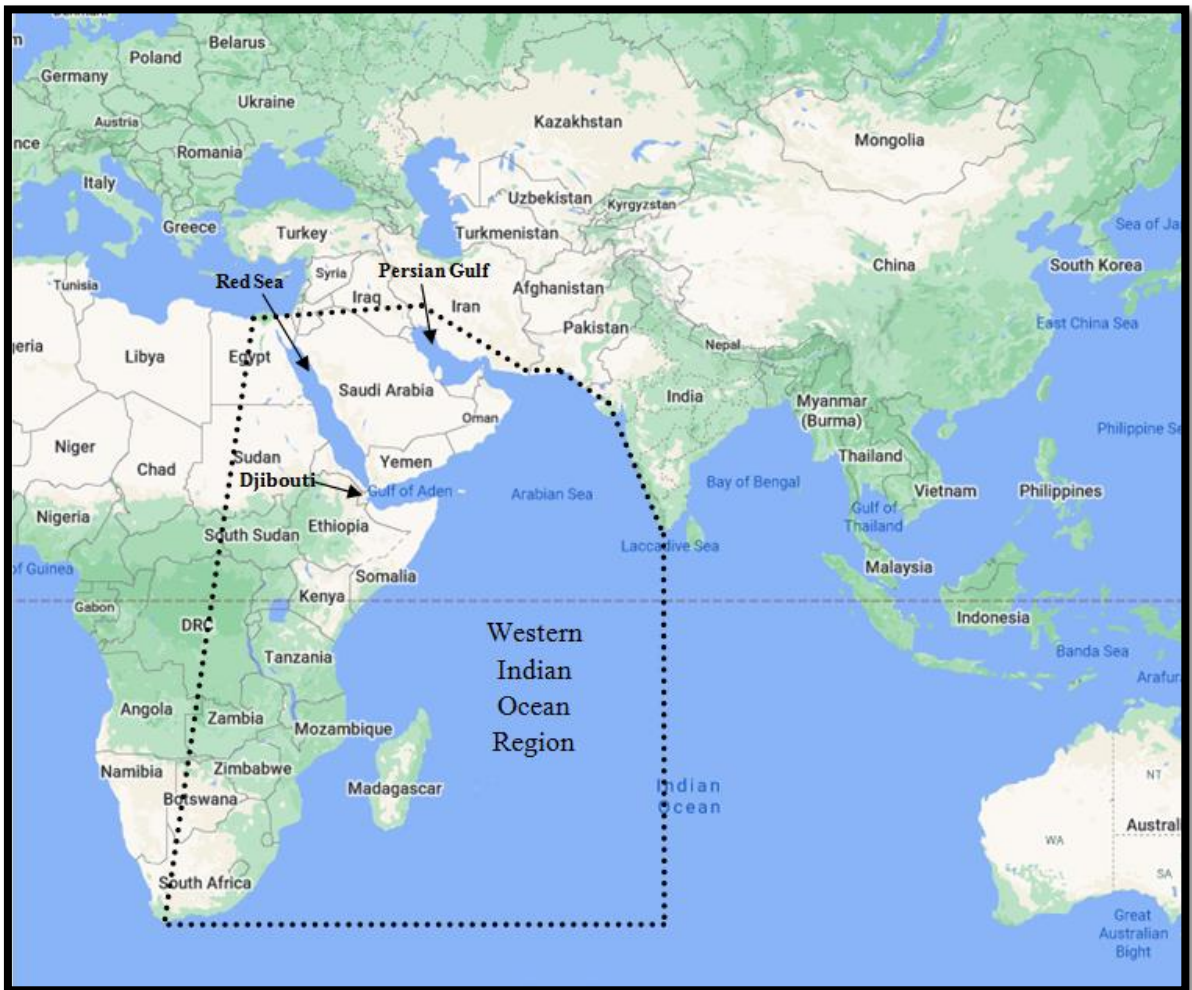
### ***The Approach***

Although the WIO region is largely viewed in the context of the Indo-Pacific, the focus of this paper is to provide a bird's eye view specifically on the WIO. It is structured to offer a flavour of macro-reality as it is unravelling in this dynamic strategic theatre. It covers major powers and their key strategic engagements in the region in an illustrative manner. The purpose is to cover activities that relate to, and influence, the geopolitics of WIO in a significant way.

The paper also analyses non-traditional security threats that have a profound impact on the security dynamics of the region. The existing non-traditional security threats were, to some extent, responsible for bringing major powers to the region and continue to provide the rationale for their sustained presence. With the WIO growing in strategic significance, the role of international organisations related to the Indian Ocean cannot be overlooked. These organisations work as necessary, even if perhaps underutilised, platforms to identify major issues and discuss essential steps to build effective cooperative strategies on pressing issues like climate change, disaster management, maritime security etc. The paper considers, albeit briefly, the role played by IORA, IONS and IOC towards regional security and governance.



### III. Map of Western Indian Ocean



Source: Google Map Data; 2021  
Map is for the purposes of illustration only. It is not to be scaled.

#### **IV. Major Powers in the Western Indian Ocean: An Overview**

With the opening of the Suez Canal in the 1860s, existing great power and colonial rivalries intensified in the WIO. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain, France and Italy competed for controlling territories and chokepoints in the region.<sup>2</sup> Britain succeeded in acquiring Aden, Egypt, Sudan and parts of Somalia limiting the French presence to the tiny but strategically important enclave of Djibouti as well as South-West Indian Ocean islands like Madagascar, Comoros and R union Island. Italy managed to establish control over Eritrea and parts of Somalia whereas Imperial Germany, the late starter in the game of colonial competition acquired Tanzania. Besides, Portugal was in possession of Mozambique and Goa (on the Western coast of India) since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The trend of great power politics surrounding WIO continued in the Cold War years with the arrival of the United States (US) and the Soviet Union as major powers. The emergence of the West Asian region as an energy heartland of the world further increased the strategic importance of the WIO in superpower calculations. The two superpowers built alliances and proxies in the WIO to gain a firm foothold in the region. The competition amongst these superpowers and their regional proxies intensified in the 1970s in the wake of the British naval withdrawal from ‘East of Suez’ in 1967. Soviet Union propped up friendly regimes in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Yemen and Somalia whereas the US extended support to countries like apartheid South Africa, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.<sup>3</sup> In the post-Cold War world, Russia was no longer able to maintain overseas military bases, while the US too partially retreated from the region after the setback of ‘Black Hawk Down’ in Somalia in 1993, in which 18 American soldiers were killed. However, it continued to sustain its presence in the region through its base at Diego Garcia. France maintained its presence in the region (with its base in Djibouti) and solidified its foothold despite budget cuts, retrenchment and reorientation of its defence policy.

The US signalled its active return to the WIO after the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terror attacks with the establishment of a military base at Djibouti in 2002. The base in Djibouti acts as a principal anchor of US military presence in the region. In the past decade, Japan and China have also established military bases in Djibouti along with France, Germany, Spain and Italy which are now regularly deploying military assets to the region to fight maritime piracy and terrorism.<sup>4</sup> In this context, China’s regular naval presence and a major military base (at Djibouti) have attracted maximum attention. India is also an active participant in the

counter-piracy efforts off the coast of Horn of Africa and has gradually expanded its diplomatic and military presence in the region. Recently, Russia has signed an agreement with Sudan to establish a military base on the Red Sea coast and this is another key factor in the evolving geopolitics of the WIO.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, key West Asian powers like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Israel and Turkey have also established a substantial presence in the parts of the WIO, especially in and around Red Sea.<sup>6</sup>

The evolving geopolitical competition in the WIO is complex and multi-dimensional. It is, simultaneously, regional as well as global in nature and scope. It spans diverse areas such as politics, diplomacy and strategy and involves multiple actors. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the presence, illustratively, and approach of major powers in the WIO and the implications of this for India.

## **V. United States**

For the US, two military commands cover WIO: Africom covers the littoral regions of Africa in the Indian Ocean and parts of the Red Seacoast whereas Centcom covers the North and Eastern coast of the Red Sea (including Egypt) as well as the southern states of Arabian Peninsula like Yemen and Oman.<sup>7</sup> Iran and Pakistan are also covered by the Centcom. These two commands and a consequently substantial US military presence (air, naval and ground assets like amphibious ships and fighter aircraft) in the WIO represent US strategic and military presence and power. In brief, US strategy towards Africa, West Asia and Indian Ocean coalesce in the WIO and its military base in Djibouti is at the centre of this engagement. The US established this base in 2002 to conduct counter-terror operations in Yemen and Somalia as well as to monitor regional developments more effectively.<sup>8</sup> Security of the sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) passing through the region remains a vital US interest. It is noteworthy that two major terror attacks, before 9/11, on US assets had taken place in the WIO: bombing of US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the attack on the naval warship *USS Cole* off the Yemeni waters in 2000.

The base at Djibouti was useful in the US' invasion of Iraq in 2003 as well as for launching surveillance flights to gather intelligence from the region. As of now, the US deploys about 4000 troops in Djibouti.<sup>9</sup> Since the attack on the US embassy in Libya in 2012, the US also maintains 150 Special Forces at Djibouti for evacuating diplomatic staff from the region.<sup>10</sup>

Over the years, US' counter-terror operations have increased manifold and the US military had deployed drones to a good effect.<sup>11</sup>The US conducts drone operations from a French controlled airport in Djibouti. *The Washington Post* had reported that "Camp Lemonnier is the centerpiece of an expanding constellation of half a dozen U.S. drone and surveillance bases in Africa, created to combat a new generation of terrorist groups across the continent, from Mali to Libya to the Central African Republic. The U.S. military also flies drones from small civilian airports in Ethiopia and the Seychelles, but those operations pale in comparison to what is unfolding in Djibouti". In fact, US drones flown from Djibouti and from a secret base in Arabian Peninsula converged over Yemen to kill an Al-Qaeda member, Anwar-Al-Awlaki in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from counter-terror efforts, the US also coordinates three naval task forces (in which several US allies and other partner nations participate to conduct anti-piracy and maritime security operations in the WIO.<sup>13</sup> Combined Task Force (CTF)-150, launched in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, is tasked to conduct maritime security operations outside the Persian/Arabian Gulf. It covers the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman and the North-West Indian Ocean.<sup>14</sup> CTF-152 complements the efforts of CTF-150 and conducts operations within the Gulf. In view of the growing menace of maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia around 2007-08, CTF-151 was launched to carry out anti-piracy operations.<sup>15</sup> CTF-151 co-ordinates with navies of other major powers like India and China to contribute to the overall maritime security in the WIO.

The US also maintains a military presence in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Seychelles.<sup>16</sup>Recently, the US announced the withdrawal of troops from Somalia and their redeployment to Kenya.<sup>17</sup>These bases are not as large as that of Djibouti but nonetheless are significant for projecting the US combat power in the region to neutralise existing and potential threats. Many of these military facilities are dubbed as 'Cooperative Security Locations' and are clandestine in nature to avoid the negative political fallout associated with the foreign military bases.<sup>18</sup> These facilities link up with the US military bases in the West Asia (such as those in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE and Oman), Djibouti as well as the Diego Garcia base (in the Central Indian Ocean) to secure the WIO for US interests.<sup>19</sup> This expansive US military presence in the WIO is assuming ever greater importance in the context of the intensifying geopolitical competition in the region.

For India, the US presence in the WIO presents elements of a dilemma. It serves to secure the maritime routes of the WIO and is useful for countering threats like terrorism, piracy and drug-trafficking. In view of the growing Chinese military presence in the region, the Indo-US maritime partnership in the WIO assumes strategic significance. However, the US' hostile posture towards Iran and Iran's counter-steps like naval exercises with China and Russia, and US interests in Af-Pak region complicates India's engagement with the WIO. As a result, finding and building on a convergence of interests between India and the US, as it has happened in the Eastern Indian Ocean, is not an easy task in the WIO and will require sustained efforts from both sides.

## **VI. Japan**

Japan, primarily a Pacific power, has been sending aircraft and naval ships in the WIO since 2009 for the counter-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia as Japanese energy and economic interests required it to enhance its activities in the region.<sup>20</sup> Anti-piracy operations also allowed Japan to project its presence in a benign manner and contribute to the international security efforts in the region. Therefore, after France and the US, Japan became the third country to open a military base at Djibouti in 2011, which is also the first overseas military base of the Japanese Self Defence Forces since the Second World War.<sup>21</sup> Japanese base at Djibouti is located near the US base and helps Japan to conduct an array of activities including supporting the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.

Japan is stepping up its efforts to engage with West Asia and Africa due to its energy, economic and geopolitical interests in the region. West Asia accounts for 89% of Japanese oil imports and 18% of gas imports.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Japan relies heavily on the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and has considerable stakes in ensuring the security and balance of power in the region. As a result, it is increasing its activities in the region including countering China's growing presence.<sup>23</sup> Growing interest of these Pacific powers in the WIO signals the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a strategic reality and is giving way to a complicated geopolitical dynamic. In this context, the importance of players like India, Japan and South Korea is steadily growing.

Developmental and economic engagement [channelled through agencies and initiatives such as Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Tokyo International Conference on

Africa's Development (TICAD)] with Africa is also emerging as a key interest for Japan in its engagement with the WIO.<sup>24</sup> Recently, in December 2020, Japanese foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi visited four African countries; three (South Africa, Mauritius and Mozambique) of which are located in the WIO.<sup>25</sup> The Indo-Japanese initiative of an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) is being projected as an alternative for the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). WIO is likely to form a crucial element of the AAGC.<sup>26</sup> However, it needs to be noted that as of now, AAGC is yet to see any concrete progress. Reportedly, India and Japan are also in talks to allow the Indian Navy, through Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA), to access Japanese base in Djibouti and the Japanese navy will be able to access India's Andaman and Nicobar islands.<sup>27</sup> India has been keen on getting access to Djibouti and Japan would be a willing partner in this endeavour. Consequently, Japanese interest in the WIO is likely to grow in the coming years and accentuate the necessity of Indo-Japan strategic partnership in the larger Indo-Pacific region.

## **VII. China**

China's emergence as a major economic and military power in the Indo-Pacific region and its expanding interest in the Indian Ocean is being watched with concern in strategic circles. For China, three developments underscored the increasing relevance of a permanent military presence in the WIO: the growing threat of maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia around 2008-09, the operation to evacuate 35,000 Chinese nationals from civil-war afflicted Libya in 2011 and the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Yemen (via Djibouti) in 2015.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, China has been progressively building closer economic and infrastructure ties with WIO countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Sudan. Over the years, China has become the largest trading partner of African countries (bilateral trade between China and Africa stood at \$ 192 billion in 2019) and depends on the West Asian and African energy resources, transported through the Indian Ocean, for its continued economic growth.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, China is engaged in building massive ports (Lamu in Kenya and Bagamoyo in Tanzania) and railways (in Kenya and Ethiopia-Djibouti) in WIO region as well as enjoys close diplomatic ties with Zimbabwe and South Africa.<sup>30</sup> The WIO is, thus, a key component of China's BRI. All of these factors point towards the growing relevance of the region in China's military and diplomatic strategy.

China's military presence in the WIO dates to 2008-09 when People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) began to deploy its warships, ostensibly, for counter-piracy operations. Since then, China has continued to deploy its naval vessels, including a nuclear submarine.<sup>31</sup> Chinese navy ships not only function to contain the maritime piracy in the WIO but also help it to study the operating environment of the Indian Ocean, conduct defence diplomacy, make port calls and regularise its overall military presence.<sup>32</sup>

The opening up of a military base at Djibouti in 2017 is the clearest expression of China's growing interest in the WIO. The military facility at Djibouti is its first forward operating base allowing China to monitor the WIO, especially the activities of the US and its allies, support its anti-piracy naval missions and protect Chinese assets and citizens in the region. China is, reportedly, enjoying the exclusive access to the Doraleh port of Djibouti which remains a cause of concern. China's base at Djibouti can host several thousand troops and is a major step in projecting Chinese power in the region.<sup>33</sup>

This presence in the WIO, coupled with its possible military base at Gwadar (in Pakistan) and deepening ties with other countries in the region including Iran presents a range of strategic challenges for India.<sup>34</sup> BRI projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are likely to push China to further increase its presence in the region. Furthermore, China has expanded its diplomatic presence in the WIO: it re-opened its embassy in Somalia in 2014 and has also built resilient ties with Madagascar and Seychelles.<sup>35</sup> In 2019, China's PLAN conducted naval exercises with Iran, Russia and South Africa in the WIO.<sup>36</sup> These activities suggest that the existing balance of power in the region is under pressure. The growing reach of PLAN is going to strain this regional balance even further. In this context, the importance of strategic co-operation between various powers with interests and capabilities in the IOR like India, Japan, France, Britain and the US cannot be overstated. The strategic picture is further complicated by the fact that Russia is also returning to the WIO.

## **VIII. Russia**

With Russia announcing establishment of a military base on the Red Sea coast in Sudan,<sup>37</sup> it needs to be noted that, Soviet Russia used to be a significant player in the WIO in 1970s and 1980s. Soviet navy had access to Berbera port in Somalia and, in the 1970s, when the Marxist regime assumed power in Ethiopia, Soviet Union had a firm foothold in the Red Sea region.<sup>38</sup>

However, Russian presence in the region declined in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In 2008-09, Russia saw an opportunity to re-establish itself in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. As a result, the Russian Navy was also a contributor to the anti-piracy efforts in the WIO.

Russian naval ambitions and policy approach towards the maritime domain were outlined in the Maritime Doctrine released in 2015.<sup>39</sup> The doctrine stated that in the Indian Ocean, Russia's interests lie in "ensuring the naval presence" to provide "security for maritime activities, including combating piracy".<sup>40</sup> It further notes that, "development of friendly relations with India is the most important goal of the National Maritime Policy in the Indian Ocean region".<sup>41</sup> Russia's return to the Red Sea with a military base is a major strategic development and, along with a Russian base in Syria on the Mediterranean coast, will enhance its ability to secure its interests and project power.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Russia and China, both, have stakes in undermining the US and its allies worldwide including in the WIO; and their military bases in and around the Red Sea will prove useful in this endeavour.

Russia is also strengthening its ties with Africa. Russia is a major arms supplier for many African countries, and it hosted the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019 at Sochi.<sup>43</sup> In 2019, two Russian bomber aircraft paid a rare visit to South Africa and the Russian Navy conducted exercises with the Chinese, Iranian and South African navies.<sup>44</sup> These steps point towards the growing Russian role and interest in the strategic affairs of the region. It is interesting to note that Kremlin-backed Russian mercenaries have been spotted in terror-affected Mozambique and Central African Republic.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Russia's return to the WIO and growing cooperation between China and Russia is something to watch out for in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. India's traditionally close ties with Russia may perhaps open opportunities for Indo-Russian security cooperation in the WIO including Russia granting access to the Indian Navy to its base in Sudan.

## **IX. India**

India, owing to its geographic location, occupies a central position in the Indian Ocean and relies heavily on the free flow of goods through these waterways. The importance of Indian Ocean was highlighted in the Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy of 2015 which stated that "India's central position in the IOR, astride the main International Shipping Lanes



(ISLs), accords distinct advantages. It places the outer fringes of the IOR and most choke points almost equidistant from India, thereby facilitating reach, sustenance and mobility of its maritime forces across the region. India is, therefore, well positioned to influence the maritime space, and promote and safeguard its national maritime interests, across the IOR”.<sup>46</sup> The strategy document further added that “the steady increase in the Indian Navy’s operational footprint across India’s areas of maritime interest, with a growing cooperative framework and contributions as a ‘security provider’ in the maritime neighbourhood, includes deployments for anti-piracy, maritime security, Non-Combat Evacuation (NEO) and HADR operations”.<sup>47</sup> The idea of India being a security provider in the IOR was also highlighted by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh during his address at the inaugural session of Chiefs of the Air Staff Conclave at Aero India in February 2021. He said that “Geopolitically India is a reliable partner in the Indian Ocean Region and can take on the role of being the net security provider in the region... India has been regularly conducting exercises to deepen HADR cooperation and coordination among its neighbours with a focus on sharing expertise and assisting building capabilities”.<sup>48</sup>

The IOR is significant considering almost 90% of India’s oil and trade flows through it. According to government figures, Indian imports through the Gulf of Aden are valued at US\$50 billion while exports total US\$60 billion.<sup>49</sup> The safety and unhindered movement of maritime trade, through ships that use this route, is a primary national concern as it directly impacts Indian economy. Given the importance of the Indian Ocean and the need for uninterrupted access, the Indian Navy is on course to rapidly modernising its fleet, expands its activities, and has in general raised its profile in the region with active exercises, port visits, exchange of good practices, collaboration and cooperation with like-minded partners and activating disaster relief programmes. The Indian Navy had also launched its first counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden in 2008. The importance of the region was also highlighted by Prime Minister Modi during his Shangri La Speech in 2018 where he said, “The Indian Ocean connects regions of diverse cultures and different levels of peace and prosperity. It also now bears ships of major powers. Both raise concerns of stability and contest...Our interests in the region are vast, and our engagement is deep. In the Indian Ocean region, our relationships are becoming stronger. We are also helping build economic capabilities and improve maritime security for our friends and partners”.<sup>50</sup>

To this end, in the past decades, India has developed various bilateral and multilateral platforms to enhance cooperation with the littoral states of the region and with various Island

nations. This has led India to emerge as an active economic and defence partner for the countries that seek to strengthen their partnership with India and enhance their own economic and security capabilities. Emphasis has been placed on developing relations with nations such as Oman, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles including assisting these states in their times of need. For instance, in November 2020, India sent food assistance to four countries (Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan and South Sudan) in the Horn. Similarly, through its logistic agreements with various countries such as France<sup>iii</sup>, Indonesia, Singapore, Oman and the US, India has access to various ports in the Indian Ocean, thereby expanding its critical foothold in the region.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to this, through the development of naval infrastructure on Agalega Island in Mauritius and Assumption Island in Seychelles, the Indian Navy would be able to maintain a permanent presence in the region. India has also established its first overseas surveillance facility in Madagascar as part of Indian Navy's strategy to protect the sea lanes of communication. India also set up, in 2010, an Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). The IFC-IOR is aimed at enhancing "Maritime Domain Awareness encompassing identification, monitoring and constant tracking of vessels is imperative to prevent any potential threat from the sea from impinging on the coastal and offshore security of the country".<sup>52</sup> The major centres with which regular exchange of maritime security information is being undertaken include Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Centre (VRMTC); Maritime Security Centre - Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) in Brest, France; Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP) headquarter at Singapore; Information Fusion Centre-Singapore (IFC-SG); and International Maritime Bureau - Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB-PRC) in Malaysia. This connected network allows India to play a more prominent role in increasing regional maritime domain awareness.<sup>53</sup> In 2020, India joined the Djibouti Code of Conduct as an Observer which will allow it to further contribute to the maritime security in the WIO.

To further its efforts to engage in the region, the Indian government in 2015 launched Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) with an aim to revive the ancient trade routes and cultural linkages. The Vision for SAGAR was outlined by Prime Minister Modi in

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<sup>iii</sup> The recently announced France, UAE and India –trilateral exercises in the Gulf of Oman under the Varuna banner, highlights the growing strategic relevance of Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the security calculus of these three countries. The exercises slated to be held in April 2021 will include complex interoperability exercises involving carrier strike groups, anti-submarine warfare aircraft and attack submarines. See: *Hindustan Times*, 9 March 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/quad-france-and-uae-join-hands-in-2-naval-exercises-to-dominate-indopacific-101615248156836.html> (Accessed on March, 10 2021)

2015 during his remarks at the commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius. The Vision for SAGAR<sup>54</sup> comprises of five elements – *first*, to safeguard Indian mainland and islands, and to defend our interests, to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region. *Second*, deepen economic and security cooperation with the maritime neighbours and island states through building their maritime security capacities and economic strengths. *Third*, take collective action and cooperation to advance peace and security in this maritime region. This is to be accomplished through efforts to strengthen various regional mechanisms for maritime cooperation – from dealing with piracy terrorism and other crimes; to marine safety and natural disasters.

*Fourth*, to seek a more integrated and cooperative future in the region that enhances the prospects for sustainable development for all. This is to be done by promoting greater collaboration in trade, tourism and investment; infrastructure development; marine science and technology; sustainable fisheries; protection of marine environment; and, the blue economy. In this, Indian Ocean Rim Association can be an important instrument for pursuing the vision for a sustainable and prosperous future in the region. *Fifth*, those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. In this, India is ready to engage with all stakeholders (littorals and non-littorals) through dialogues, exercises, capacity building and economic partnership.

To promote the vision of SAGAR, India in 2020 launched three critical missions to provide assistance to its Indian Ocean countries during the on-going pandemic. These missions highlighted India's position as a "dependable partner and the Indian Navy as the Preferred Security Partner and First responder".<sup>55</sup> SAGAR-I mission was launched in May 2020 to provide food items, COVID related medicines, and medical assistance teams to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros.<sup>56</sup> In continuation of its efforts to provide assistance to the nations to fight against COVID-19 pandemic and other natural calamities, Indian Navy launched its SAGAR-II mission in November 2020 to provide food aid to the African nations. INS Airavat delivered food aid from India to Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea.<sup>57</sup> SAGAR-III was launched in December 2020 as part of India's HADR assistance. The Indian navy ships delivered 15 Tons each of HADR stores for the flood-affected people of Central Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>58</sup> Continuing its outreach to the region, India also responded to the urgent appeals of Government of Madagascar by sending consignment of 1000 metric tonnes of rice and 100,000 HCQ tablets to deal with the humanitarian crisis in southern Madagascar due to severe drought. INS Jalashwa left with the

food and medical assistance on 3 March 2021 for the Port of Ehoala.<sup>59</sup> India also sent an Indian Naval training team to be deployed in Madagascar for capacity building and training of the Malagasy Special Forces.

As part of its larger Indian Ocean strategy, India has also played a leading role in the formation of IOR-ARC [later Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)] in 1997. The objective was to create a platform for the littoral states of the Indian Ocean to discuss their shared concerns and common interests, including maritime security in the regional context, as well as to meet the emerging traditional and non-traditional security, including piracy, illegal fishing, human and weapons trafficking, drug smuggling and climate change. Similarly, in 2008 India launched the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) with a view to provide a forum for all the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean to cooperate on mutually agreed areas for better regional security. The symposium is intended to generate flow of information between naval professionals to develop a common understanding and cooperative solutions in areas of common interest such as HADR, information security, interoperability and maritime security.<sup>60</sup> Both these initiatives are indicative of India's growing maritime security footprint in the region and in playing an important role in safeguarding these important SLOCs.

## **X. European Stakeholders**

While Indian Ocean is a primary maritime space of concern for India, for Europe the immediate strategic concerns lies in the Mediterranean, Middle East and the Northern Africa –parts of the latter two overlap with the WIO. The European Union (EU) and its member states are therefore active in maritime security of the region, specifically in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia under the aegis of Operation ATALANTA. As 30 % of Europe's trade is with Asia and movement of goods relies on these SLOCs, ensuring safe and secure sea lanes are extremely crucial for the European member states.

The EU in its 2019 Factsheet on 'Enhancing Security Cooperation in and around Asia' acknowledged maritime security as an important area with an emphasis on contributing to an open and secure maritime domain as "European prosperity and Asian peace and security are closely connected".<sup>61</sup> While five European countries (France, Britain, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany) have come out with their Indo-Pacific policies outlining their priorities in the region, the current paper looks specifically at the presence of three European actors in the

WIO. The EU which has substantial presence in the region through its various initiatives as well as France and the UK, which can be called as traditional powers in the region owing to their colonial past as well as long-term deployments in the region, are covered in the paper.

## **1. The European Union**

The EU has been an active player in the region since it launched its counter-piracy operations in 2008. Since then, it has devoted significant financial and strategic resources to enhance maritime security in the WIO. Brussels views stability in the Indian Ocean as central to its own internal stability and economic growth. This was highlighted in the EU's Maritime Security Strategy of 2014 where its interests were explained in details. These included "territorial security, international maritime cooperation and peace, protection of critical maritime infrastructure, freedom of navigation, protection of economic interests at sea, common situational awareness, cross-sectoral coordination, information sharing and interoperability".<sup>62</sup> By promoting a multi-sectoral approach to the region - by combining training, information sharing, maritime domain awareness, cooperation with the littoral states - EU has established a considerable foothold in the WIO. Its approach to the region has four key dimensions – EU Naval Missions, the Djibouti Code, Maritime Security (MASE) and EU Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO).

First, EU has three active missions in the region – EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) ATALANTA was launched in December 2008 under the CSDP Framework. The mandate for the Operation ATALANTA was expanded in December 2020 to include secondary tasks like countering trafficking of weapons and narcotics, and to monitor illegal activities at sea. Launched in 2012, EUCAP Somalia (previously EUCAP Nestor) is a civilian mission aimed at contributing to the capacity building of maritime civilian law enforcement capability in Somalia; third, is the EU Training Mission – Somalia (EUTM Somalia), launched in 2010, is an EU military training mission which aims to strengthen the Somali National Government (SNG) and the institutions of Somalia, by providing military training to members of the Somali National Armed Forces (SNAF). Together, EU NAVFOR, EUCAP Somalia and EUTM Somalia form the EU's Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa. Overall, the European Council has extended the mandate for all the three operations till 31 December 2022. Apart from these three operations, European naval forces are also active partners in NATO's Operation Ocean Shield and multinational Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 of US Combined Maritime Forces.

Second, the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCOC) established in 2009, is aimed at counter-piracy and armed robbery in the WIO, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The EU has played a credible role as an Observer to DCOC through the creation of Information Sharing Centres in countries like Yemen, Kenya etc. and a maritime training centre in Djibouti to expand security architecture in the region. It has also actively assisted in the operationalisation of the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Madagascar and Regional Maritime Operational Coordination Centre (RMOCC) in Seychelles.<sup>63</sup>

Third, launched in 2012, the objective of EU-sponsored Maritime Security (MASE) programme is to strengthen the capacity of Eastern and Southern Africa-Indian Ocean region against piracy and for maritime security. It has been critical in developing and strengthening of law enforcement capacity to effectively counter maritime crime. Fourth, EU launched CRIMARIO in 2015 with an aim to support the Eastern African countries to enhance their Maritime Situational Awareness.<sup>iv</sup> CRIMARIO seeks to promote coordination and interoperability of information sharing centres across the region through training and capacity building exercises. It has implemented a series of initiatives like the launch of web-based information sharing and incident management network called IORIS.<sup>64</sup> In 2020, EU updated the mandate of CRIMARIO to expand its geographical scope from Africa to Asia. CRIMARIO-II is based on the premise of contributing to secure maritime domain “through cross-sectoral, inter-agency and cross-regional cooperation”.<sup>65</sup> This extended mandate highlights the priority that is now being given to the Asian partners to strengthen the information sharing, inter-agency maritime surveillance, and compliance with international law and expand the scope of maritime security interests.

With CRIMARIO and MASE, the EU has been able to bring forth its two critical expertise in the region – “CRIMARIO brings its expertise in the field of training and maritime information sharing”<sup>66</sup> and “MASE brings its expertise in the field of governance with its emphasis on the free flow of knowledge on maritime issues, sharing of maritime information and in the fight against maritime crime.”

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<sup>iv</sup> The sharing and fusion of data from various sources to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the maritime domain and to promote its security and safety.

## 2. France

In a paper on French strategy in the Indian Ocean, Isabelle Saint-Mézard argued that “In many ways, France’s presence in the Indian Ocean illustrates its ambition to be a middle power with global outreach”<sup>67</sup>, highlighting the unique position France holds in the Indian Ocean. For France, Indian Ocean is important for following reasons - first, it is considered to be a traditional player in the region. Between the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, France was a global maritime power with its colonial empire including several Indian Ocean islands Madagascar, R union Island, Comoros, etc. and including key trading spots like Pondicherry, Djibouti etc. Since then, it has claimed a special position in the Indian Ocean as a legitimate regional power. Today, these claims are justified on the basis of presence of French overseas territories of R union Island and Mayotte in the WIO. As these are its overseas territories, France benefits from their exclusive economic zones as well as maritime rights.

Second, the region is of strategic importance as a majority of France’s trade volume passes through the area and is also essential in meeting its energy needs. The Indian Ocean is strategically located between Europe and Asia, and its maritime routes are used to import crude oil. Also, with increasing international trade between Europe and Asia through these strategic SLOCs, France is heavily invested in the freedom of navigation and protection of sea lanes as any disruption in the movement of goods or crude oil would have lasting impact on the economies of France and Europe.

Third, Indian Ocean is also critical for the security-related activities which has resulted in substantial French military presence with R union Island (Pointe des Galets) and Mayotte permanently housing patrol vessels, frigates and small reaction forces which assist in maritime surveillance and training sessions with African partners. In addition, France also maintains a permanent presence in Djibouti. The military presence in Djibouti ensures that France has a constant strategic presence in East Africa and along the crucial SLOCs between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. In 2009, it established its military base, *Camp de la Paix*, in Abu Dhabi which is composed of three military camps – land forces, naval base and an air base near Al-Dhafra which is strategically located in the Strait of Hormuz between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, giving France a permanent presence on this key global oil supply route.<sup>68</sup> These four military bases of France – R union Island, Mayotte, Djibouti and UAE are referred to as “quadrilat re fran ais” (French Quadrilateral) to safeguard its interests in the WIO and provide constant surveillance for the SLOCs.<sup>69</sup> Apart

from its own military presence, France also contributes to the EU's Operation ATALANTA and EUCAP Nestor, and NATO's Ocean Shield operations in the region. France has, since 2007, launched operations to escort World Food Programme ships to Somalia.<sup>70</sup>

Fourth, France also features prominently in various regional forums. It became a dialogue partner in the IORA in 2001 and a permanent member of the Association in 2020. It is also a founding member of Indian Ocean Commission, which was established in 1984 with an aim to develop the small island nations economically and in security-related issues. France is also an active member of IONS which was established in 2008 to enhance inter-operability between the navies and maritime agencies of its members and observer states. Together this allows France to play a prominent role in the WIO in protecting its interest and projecting power.

### **3. United Kingdom**

For major part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian Ocean was considered as a “British Lake” owing to its colonial presence in littoral states such as British India, Oman, Cape Town, Ceylon, Maldives, Mauritius, and Kenya etc.<sup>71</sup> This gave Britain control over key choke points in the Indian Ocean. Subsequent waves of decolonisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought an end to the long-established control of the British Royal Navy as it withdrew from various bases in the region.

Since 1965, Britain has maintained a presence in the region through the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)<sup>v</sup> referred to as Chagos archipelago. This archipelago is also home to strategic US Naval Support Facility on Diego Garcia. The granting of base facilities on Diego Garcia is a key security feature of the US–UK security cooperation. The base is strategically located as it sits at the centre of the Indian Ocean, offering almost equal access to all major shipping lanes and, to the rim and island states of the region. Diego Garcia base allows the US Navy to maintain an active presence in the larger Indian Ocean. The base maintains presence of maritime patrol aircraft and especially US Air Force heavy bombers which have been part of major combat missions in support of US operations throughout Southwest Asia since 1991.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>v</sup>The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), an archipelago of 58 islands covering some 640,000 sq km of ocean, is a British Overseas Territory. See: <https://biot.gov.io/about/> (Accessed March 10, 2021)



The sovereignty of this archipelago is contested between Britain and Mauritius, with the latter claiming that it was forced to trade the archipelago in the Indian Ocean in 1965 for independence. On the other hand, the UK says it does not recognise Mauritius' claim to sovereignty, with the Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), time and again, insisting that it has every right to the islands – “The UK has no doubt as to our sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), which has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814. Mauritius has never held sovereignty over the BIOT and the UK does not recognise its claim”.<sup>73</sup> The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in February 2019 had ruled that continued British occupation of the remote Indian Ocean archipelago was illegal. This was followed by a UN General Assembly voting, on 22 May 2019, by an overwhelming majority of 116 to six to demand the UK to “unconditionally end its occupation of the Archipelago”<sup>74</sup> within six months. The UK dismissed the opinions as advisory, which prompted Mauritius to approach the United Nation's International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, Hamburg. The tribunal, in January 2021, ruled in favour of Mauritius and “criticised the UK's failure to hand the territory over to its former colony, Mauritius, by December 2019, as earlier demanded by a near-unanimous vote at the UN's General Assembly.”<sup>75</sup> So far, both the UK and the US have argued that “security issues outweigh emotive arguments about the ownership of a handful of tiny, and sparsely populated islands”.<sup>76</sup>

The UK maintains a critical presence in the Indian Ocean, its naval forces were deployed during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980s and since then, it has maintained a permanent presence in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman through its Armilla Patrol so as to establish a standing patrol to protect commercial sea traffic in the region. During the 1991 Gulf War, the area of operation was expanded to include the Red Sea. The UK was also actively involved during the 2003 operations against Iraq with the deployment of carrier-led naval units to the region. From 2003 until May 2011, the Royal Navy also trained Iraqi sailors and marines<sup>77</sup>. The UK also contributes significantly to the anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden under EU Operation ATALANTA and NATO's Operation Ocean Shield.

Britain opened a permanent military base in Bahrain so as to boost its presence and role as a major player in the region, making it the first UK base East of Suez since the 1970s. The UK Naval Support facility at Mina Salman would be staffed by up to 500 soldiers, sailors and airmen. The base is strategic as it would support UK's operations in the Persian Gulf and would host its new aircraft carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, UK has expanded security ties with Oman, with the government announcing a joint

partnership with the country in 2016 to establish a permanent British Joint Logistics Support Base near the Duqm port. Geopolitically, the base offers multiple advantages for the UK in the Indian Ocean, “looking south to the Gulf of Aden, east to the Arabian Sea and north to the Strait of Hormuz entrance to the Gulf. This will enable more effective UK deployments to continue anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden”.<sup>79</sup> This was followed by Britain and Oman signing a new joint defence agreement in 2019 confirming the Royal Navy’s ability to call at the Port of Duqm.<sup>80</sup>

The renewed focus on the Indian Ocean by the UK can be understood in terms of the larger role that the country is trying to carve out post-Brexit. Britain has re-focused its attention on the role it can play in the maritime domain East of Suez and underscore its strategy to be part of the emerging dynamics in the region. Moreover, as post-Brexit UK focuses on Asia to increase its economic cooperation with the region, the importance of region’s SLOCs would become a major issue for the country in justifying its increasing naval presence.

## **XI. West Asian Powers**

As stated earlier, West Asian states like Yemen and Oman are integral part of the WIO. Besides, the Red Sea is critical in the geostrategic calculations of the WIO. Thus, the activities of West Asian states in the Red Sea region and their involvement in conflicts like Yemen are important developments in the context of regional geopolitics of the WIO.

Historically, the Red Sea separated Africa from West Asia. However, in the last few years, the Red Sea has emerged as a connecting link between West Asian rivalries and the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. While the rivalry between Qatar and Turkey on one side, and UAE and Saudi Arabia on the other is playing out in the northern WIO, states like Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia are experiencing greater engagement from these West Asian powers. Iran and Israel are also active in this unfolding geopolitics. Consequently, the WIO has become home to a complicated strategic scenario wherein major powers along with regional players are jostling for influence and are attempting to forge a favourable regional environment for furthering their strategic interests. The most visible manifestation of this interest is demonstrated in the willingness of these powers to open military bases.

UAE has been one of the most active Gulf States in the northern WIO. It has significant economic and military interests in the Horn of Africa. UAE’s foreign policy priorities i.e.,

curb Iranian influence and limit the spread of political Islam as championed by Qatar and Turkey have been pushing it to play an expansive role in the region. It also seeks to expand its influence in the region by developing ports. Consequently, it has been involved in the war in Yemen since 2015 and is engaging with the regional states to secure a foothold. UAE is developing the port of Assab in Eritrea, Berbera in Somaliland (a break-away state from Somalia) and Bosasso in Puntland (Somalia).<sup>81</sup> It also controls several strategically located islands off the coast of Yemen like Socotra and Perim Islands. It controls parts of the Yemeni coast including the port city of Aden.<sup>82</sup> Aden was once a key military base in the British imperial strategy and even now has a strategically significant location monitoring global oil supplies passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb. Through the growing diplomatic role and military profile, UAE seeks to reshape the regional politics and security of the Red Sea coast.<sup>83</sup> Besides, military facilities along the Red Sea coast and a strong foothold near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait allow UAE to punch above its weight. The future of UAE's control over Yemeni ports and coastline depends on the trajectory of the Yemeni conflict. However, foothold in Eritrea, Somaliland and Puntland is likely to endure for the foreseeable future enabling the expansive politico-military profile for UAE in the region.

Apart from UAE, Saudi Arabia is another major power engaged in this geopolitical game and has been taking a greater interest in the Horn of Africa since the military intervention in Yemen that began in 2015. Saudi Arabia is a Red Sea power by itself and has demonstrated interest in opening a base in Djibouti. However, the exact location of the base is yet to be finalised.<sup>84</sup> Saudi Arabia also cooperated with UAE in opening the military base in Eritrea. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also played a key role in ending the two-decade old Eritrea-Ethiopia dispute and in Sudanese political transition.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, by engaging Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, Saudi Arabia and UAE have managed to acquire a robust foothold in the Horn of Africa.

Meanwhile, Qatar and Turkey have also been taking steps to expand their footprint in the region. Turkey under President Recep Erdogan is pursuing the foreign policy strategy of neo-Ottomanism and is rebuilding its influence in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, Turkey has been busy engaging states from Libya to Somalia. It has demonstrated willingness to establish military base in Suakin in Sudan which, in the past, used to host an Ottoman naval base. It has already built strong diplomatic and military ties with states of Somalia and Libya. Turkish military support is significant in building the capabilities of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia. Turkey has opened a military

training facility in Somalia and also operates the airport and seaport of Mogadishu.<sup>87</sup> However, Saudi Arabia and UAE see Turkish presence in the region warily and are keen to limit its growing influence.

Turkey has also built a strong partnership with Qatar, another country that has been actively engaging with the Horn of Africa states. The blockade of Qatar by three Gulf powers (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain) and Egypt in 2017 pushed Qatar to solidify its ties with Turkey and actively engage the Horn of Africa. Turkey operates a military base in Qatar.<sup>88</sup> Besides, just like Turkey, Qatar had taken steps to engage Sudan and Somalia. However, the political transition in Sudan, underway since April 2019, has raised questions about the previously agreed contracts and the influence of Qatar in Sudan. Sudan is worried about the Qatari backing of Islamist groups including the Muslim Brotherhood and seeks to break out of financial and diplomatic isolation.<sup>89</sup> Growing ties with Saudi Arabia and UAE and by extension with Israel and US are key to achieving these objectives. On account of this, Qatar has suffered loss of influence in Sudan. Turkey-Qatar partnership and their forays in the Horn of Africa have resulted in complicated regional balance of power and stability.

Apart from these Gulf States, Israel is also engaged in expanding its influence in the Red Sea region. Israel's primary motivation is to limit the Iranian influence in the region and monitor Iranian activities (such as clandestine arms supply to its proxies). To that end, reportedly, Israel is maintaining small naval teams in Eritrea<sup>90</sup> and has also established a listening post in Eritrea. Reportedly, Israel in collaboration with the UAE is also operating a spy base in Socotra off the coast of Yemen.<sup>91</sup> Given the realignment of relationships in the Gulf, an anti-Iran axis of Israel-Saudi-UAE has emerged. These states share interests in limiting the Iranian influence and hence, the co-operation between them in the Red Sea region cannot be ruled out. In fact, in 2017, a spokesperson for Houthi rebels in Yemen has claimed that Israel is also participating in the Saudi-led war in Yemen and hinted that Israeli base in Eritrea could be targeted.<sup>92</sup>

Geopolitical power plays between these West Asian powers are further complicating the strategic picture of the WIO. Their alliances and counter-alliances, and partnerships with major powers are generating a web of complex regional security scenarios. In this way, the region around the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, as also the Arabian/Persian Gulf, emerges as a separate as well as interconnected strategic theatre in the WIO which has a region-wide impact.

## **XII. Non-Traditional Security Challenges in WIO**

Although the focus of the paper is on major powers and their activities in the region, WIO faces a plethora of non-traditional security (NTS) challenges. In fact, it can also be argued that apart from the enduring geostrategic importance of the location of the WIO and consequently, its increasing relevance for the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific, NTS challenges that existed in the region brought foreign powers to the region. The weak state capacities in the WIO and the fight against NTS challenges became the primary rationale for these major powers to continue their military involvement in some form, and to solidify their foothold in the region. Therefore, we now have a situation wherein major powers are jostling for greater influence while at the same time NTS challenges continue to trouble the region. Therefore, to fully comprehend the problems facing this region and locate the major power interest in the region, a look at NTS challenges is necessary.

NTS challenges broaden the concept of security and move beyond the narrow conception which privileges the military security. NTS challenges are defined as “challenges to the survival and well-being of peoples and states that arise primarily out of non-military sources”.<sup>93</sup> NTS issues gained prominence in the post-Cold War world and include challenges such as terrorism, maritime piracy, smuggling of arms and drugs, climate change, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing etc.<sup>94</sup> Issues like food and energy security are also considered part of NTS challenges. States in the WIO face these challenges and regional states, major powers as well as specialised international and regional institutions are engaged in fighting these challenges.

### **1. Terrorism**

Terrorism remains a key NTS challenge for the WIO. States such as Kenya, Tanzania, Yemen, Somalia and Mozambique have been affected by terrorism to a varying degree. Proximity of the region to West Asia as well as challenges such as religious fundamentalism and poverty play critical role in further compounding the terror threat. In fact, as noted before, the US primarily established its base at Djibouti in 2002 to fight terrorism in Yemen and Somalia. Some of the major terror incidents in the WIO post-9/11 include attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi in Kenya (2013) and deadly bombings in Mogadishu (2017).<sup>95</sup> Despite years of counter-terror operations launched by the US and Kenya, and the

deployment of African Union's (AU) peacekeeping force, the threat of Al-Shabaab operating in Somalia remains potent.<sup>96</sup> The Islamic State also has some presence in East Africa.<sup>97</sup>

In the last few years, Mozambique has emerged as a new frontier for terror groups. With the help of Russian and South African mercenaries, Mozambican security forces are fighting terrorism in the northern region of Cabo Delgado. However, their efforts have not had much success.<sup>98</sup> Conflict in northern Mozambique has displaced 420,000 people and the situation is described as "really dire".<sup>99</sup> Coast of Cabo Delgado is energy-rich and hence, the stakes are high for both sides.<sup>100</sup> Also, the emergence of terror threat has raised serious questions about the willingness of foreign companies to invest.

## **2. Maritime Piracy**

Waters off the Horn of Africa, especially the Gulf of Aden, has been plagued by the threat of maritime piracy. Due to the weak state capacities to secure their coastal regions and lack of employment as well as developmental opportunities, pirates operate with impunity and threaten the global shipping passing through the region. The threat of piracy was at its peak during 2007 and 2012 with the region from Red Sea to the Arabian Sea facing constant pirate attacks. For instance, in 2011, 237 attacks took place in the region which resulted in loss of US\$ 8.3 billion to businesses and insurers.<sup>101</sup>

Since 2008-09, major powers including China, South Korea, India and Japan have launched coordinated naval efforts to deter and curb piracy.<sup>102</sup> Following the lead taken by the US, EU too launched operations to fight piracy. Over the years, EU's presence in the region has expanded with EU now engaged with the World Food Program to tackle food insecurity in Somalia.<sup>103</sup> Due to these collective efforts, the threat of piracy has declined; however, the major powers continue to deploy their naval ships to the region. The most notable naval deployments are from China, which sent a nuclear submarine to support anti-piracy operations.<sup>104</sup> There are growing linkages between maritime piracy and terrorism, especially in Somalia and Mozambique.

## **3. Smuggling of Drugs and Arms**

Smuggling of drugs and arms remains a serious threat in the WIO. Over the years, the US has significantly expanded the ambit of its military operations from fighting terrorism and curbing maritime piracy to ensuring maritime security in the WIO by tackling threats like

drugs and arms trafficking. International agencies like UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are also engaged with the WIO states in capacity-building to help them counter the threat of smuggling. In the WIO, in particular, East and Southern African coastal areas have emerged as major locations for the heroin sent from Afghanistan. These supplies are primarily meant for Europe but are also consumed in the East and Southern African region. The heroin network is quite active in the region from Pakistan to South Africa and is closely linked with criminal gangs as well as political elite in the region. The Indian Ocean African states have been affected by heroin trade and its ill-effects (such as making ports in the region porous, growing violence and the spread of HIV-AIDS, money laundering etc.) so much, that the East and Southern African seaboard is called 'the Heroin coast'.<sup>105</sup>

Illegal arms' trafficking is also prevalent in the WIO. The region between Iran, Somalia and the Suez Canal via the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea which includes states like Yemen is of great concern for the illegal supply of arms. A case in point is Iranian weapons supplies for Houthi rebels in Yemen. More worryingly, the conflict in Yemen has provided favourable conditions for the arms smuggling to the Horn of Africa. Arms are smuggled to Somalia and from there they are transported to other countries in the region.<sup>106</sup> The flow of drugs and arms is linked with terrorism and maritime piracy. The combined effect of these threats makes the WIO states, especially in the East and Southern Africa, vulnerable and volatile. Links between corrupt officials, politicians and criminal gangs along with these networks pose considerable security and developmental challenges for state authorities. These problems also tend to have very high social costs.<sup>107</sup>

#### **4. Climate Change**

The WIO states like Madagascar, Malawi, South Sudan and Zimbabwe are among the most affected states in the world by the effects of climate change. Cyclone Idai, which ravaged the Southwest Indian Ocean region in 2019, caused unprecedented damage in Zimbabwe that the impoverished country needed US\$ 1 billion to rebuild damaged infrastructure and livelihoods. Terror-afflicted Mozambique is also among the most vulnerable African country to climate change. As per the World Bank, annual floods induced by cyclones have caused Mozambique to cost an average of US\$ 440 million.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the region stretching from Sudan in the north to Zimbabwe in the south has been consistently facing adverse effects of climate change like droughts, cyclones and floods. As a result, states like India have been routinely dispatching food and medical assistance to these afflicted states. In the coming

decades, occurrences of climate change-induced are likely to increase substantially and the region will be at the receiving end of such calamities.

### **5. Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing**

As if the ill-effects of piracy, terrorism, smuggling and climate change were not enough, the WIO region is the victim of IUU fishing. As per the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), IUU fishing is a "broad term that captures a wide variety of fishing activity. IUU fishing is found in all types and dimensions of fisheries; it occurs both on the high seas and in areas within national jurisdiction". IUU fishing "concerns all aspects and stages of the capture and utilisation of fish, and it may sometimes be associated with organized crime".<sup>109</sup> In the Indian Ocean, IUU fishing has emerged as a major threat especially to the coastal communities as well as for national economies. In 2007, FAO noted that, in the context of IUU fishing, "western Indian Ocean and the maritime areas along the coast of eastern Africa" have emerged as areas of "particular concern".<sup>110</sup> In this region, "fishing vessels of various flags have taken advantage of the absence in coastal countries of strong enforcement mechanisms". In 2017, it was estimated that WIO states lose US\$ 200-500 million annually due to the IUU fishing.<sup>111</sup>

Chinese fishing fleet, which is estimated to have 800,000 vessels, allegedly leads the world in IUU fishing activities. It is understood that Communist Party of China incentivises IUU fishing and has provided generous state subsidies for fishing vessels and trawlers. Consequently, Chinese fishing vessels have been allegedly engaged in IUU fishing in regions like the WIO which are far away from the Chinese mainland. In 2020, the US took cognizance of Chinese IUU fishing and a series of policy actions were taken to target China. The US Coast Guard has declared IUU Fishing as a "leading global maritime security threat" and highlighted Chinese activities that included violations of sovereignty and international law.<sup>112</sup> However, unless and until the littoral states of the WIO develop capabilities to secure their own coastlines, it would be hard to stop IUU fishing.

### **XIII. Regional Organisations in the WIO**

The WIO boasts of established regional governance architecture which provides equal platform for the littoral and the non-littoral players. These organisations provide voice to all



key stakeholders to highlight their priorities and concerns to push for collective action and cooperation on the issues of mutual concern.

There are multiple regional organisations in Africa and in West Asia which cover some states of the WIO. It includes the African Union (AU), Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Arab League, and Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) etc. In the Indian Ocean itself, there are three principal regional structures namely, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) which cover parts of the WIO. Owing to their importance in the economic, diplomatic and security affairs of the Indian Ocean, all three merit a greater examination.

### **1. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**

IORA is an inter-governmental, regional association which is a crucial platform to discuss issues that influence the affairs of the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean Region-Association for Regional Cooperation [(IOR-ARC) – changed to IORA in 2013] was formed in March 1997 and is headquartered in Mauritius. Countries of the Indian Ocean Rim are eligible for the membership of IORA and as of February 2021, there are 23 member-states and 9 dialogue partners<sup>vi</sup>.<sup>113</sup> The organisation is unique as it is ‘regional’ in the sense that it is focused on a specific geographical region with a defined criterion for membership and yet simultaneously, it is ‘inter-regional’ as its member states are drawn from geographical areas which constitute regions in their own right (like Southern Africa, South-East Asia etc.) and are part of the broader Indian Ocean region.

IORA charter notes that, the association “will facilitate and promote economic co-operation, bringing together inter-alia representatives of Member States’ governments, businesses and academia. In a spirit of multilateralism, the Association seeks to build and expand understanding and mutually beneficial co-operation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach”.<sup>114</sup> It further observes that the co-operation “will be based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence,

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<sup>vi</sup>IORA members include - Australia, Bangladesh, the Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and France  
Dialogue partners of IORA are Egypt, China, US, UK, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Japan and South Korea.

non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit”.<sup>115</sup> IORA operates on a consensual decision-making model and bars “bilateral and other issues likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional co-operation efforts”.<sup>116</sup> The objective of IORA is to “promote the sustained growth and balanced development of the region and of the Member States, and to create common ground for regional economic co-operation”.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, IORA seeks to “encourage close interaction of trade and industry, academic institutions, scholars and the peoples of the Member States without any discrimination among Member States and without prejudice to obligations under other regional economic and trade co-operation arrangements”.<sup>118</sup>

From its inception till 2010, IORA remained a relatively ineffective regional organisation as the concept of Indian Ocean regionalism did not receive as much attention as it should. However, from 2011 onwards, IORA began to shed past inhibition and emerged as a key regional platform owing to the growing importance of Indian Ocean for world politics and the growing geopolitical interests of rim countries. India along with Australia took an active interest in reviving the IORA platform. In fact, IORA website notes that “Since India became the IORA Chair for the period 2011-2013, there has been a growing direction and determination to strengthen institutions and capacities within IORA”.<sup>119</sup> During India’s chairmanship, it “revitalised” the organisation and adopted six priority and two focus areas which act as guiding principles for its activities. These were: maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, cultural and tourism exchanges, academic, science and technology, blue economy and women empowerment.<sup>120</sup> Evidently, the focus of IORA is more on issues related to socio-economic development and less on managing security problems of the Indian Ocean but this could change given the ongoing geopolitical churn. IORA has undertaken flagship projects like the Somalia and Yemen Development Program (SYDP) and the IORA Sustainable Development Program. Indian Ocean Dialogue (IOD) is another flagship program of IORA which began in 2014.<sup>121</sup> In 2019, Indian Council of World Affairs hosted the IOD in New Delhi.<sup>122</sup>

In the future, importance of IORA is set to increase even further. India considers IORA as a “platform for promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific through greater inter-regional partnership”.<sup>123</sup> It is also a useful vehicle for India to assume and project its leading role in the Indian Ocean affairs. India along with other like-minded countries can work towards evolving a code of conduct and push for greater connectivity as well as infrastructure development in the region. Issues such as transparency of financing and quality

of infrastructure could also be taken up on IORA platform as it has serious implications for development and, trade and investment strategies of regional states.

Although IORA is not centred on the Western Indian Ocean, many states of WIO are members of the organisation. Through programs and projects like SYDP and focus areas like the blue economy and disaster management, IORA is paying attention to the concerns of the WIO. Membership of France (through Reunion Island) is the latest instance of the growing salience of WIO within the IORA.<sup>124</sup> It signals the acceptance of France as an Indian Ocean power by the rim countries. It is likely to increase the capacity of IORA and further strengthen the Organisation. Therefore, IORA is becoming ever more relevant in the discussions on the WIO.

## **2. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)**

The IONS is an Indian initiative and is modelled on the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). The IONS, which began in 2008, is “an inclusive and voluntary initiative that brings together navies of littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region with the aim of increasing maritime cooperation and enhancing regional security. It is a forum for discussion, policy formulation as well as numerous aspects of naval operations, all of which are crucial elements of a cooperative mechanism”.<sup>125</sup> The IONS is considered as an “unprecedented initiative” which “has grown in significance and has been whole-heartedly accepted across the Indian Ocean Region, establishing itself as an effective platform for discussion and deliberation on issues related to maritime security”.<sup>126</sup> The IONS consist of “24 member and 08 observer nations that are geographically grouped into four sub-regions, namely South-Asian, West Asian, East African, South East Asian & Australian Littorals”.<sup>127</sup> It established three working groups on “Maritime Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) as well as Information Sharing and Interoperability”.<sup>128</sup> In fact, IONS has evolved guidelines for HADR operations.

There is overlap in the membership of IONS and WPNS with states like Australia, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore being members of both the initiatives.<sup>129</sup> The Royal Australian Navy considers IONS “critical to building effective maritime security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region” and believes that it is “fundamental to our collective prosperity”.<sup>130</sup> IONS has a two-year chairmanship and till date, India (2008), UAE (2010), South Africa (2012), Australia (2014), Bangladesh (2016) and Iran (2018) have assumed the role of a chair.<sup>131</sup> In

2020, France assumed the chairmanship of IONS for 2020-2022.<sup>132</sup> Just like IORA, the growing role of France in the IONS is a clear expression of the increasing importance of WIO in the overall matrix of Indian Ocean security and, indeed, international security.

Initiatives like the IONS play a major role in building norms, patterns of behaviour and habits of co-operation in the region. They bring the specialised services together and facilitate greater interaction. For India, the IONS is a critical instrument to project its primacy in the Indian Ocean. It also helps India to strengthen existing maritime partnerships and build a community of states that share similar security concerns. Taken together, IONS and IORA provide an inclusive as well as region-wide security and developmental architecture, respectively, for the Indian Ocean.

### **3. Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)**

Interestingly, the strength of both, IORA and IONS, initiatives is also their primary weakness in the context of WIO. Because IORA and IONS cover the whole Indian Ocean, WIO remains just one of the many regions for these regional organisations. Although they cover issues related to WIO and has many states from WIO as members, it is not possible for these organisations to exclusively focus on WIO. In this context, the role and importance of IOC needs to be underlined. The IOC was formed in 1982 and covers South-West Indian Ocean. It has five member states i.e., Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and R union Island (France). These five countries are bound by the common language (French) as well as by the experience of French colonialism at some point of time in their history. Just like IORA, secretariat of IOC is also located in Mauritius. IOC is the only regional organisation consisting of island states and “defends the specificities of its member states on the continental and international stages”.<sup>133</sup>

French membership of IOC allows it to dominate the group and positions itself as a power ‘of’ the Indian Ocean and not just a power ‘in’ the Indian Ocean. Over the years, France has guarded its primacy in the South-West Indian Ocean and the membership of IOC has played a major role in legitimising the French role and presence in the region.<sup>134</sup> Before the emergence of IORA and IONS, IOC was the only regional organisation in the Indian Ocean and even now remains the only one specifically located in the Western Indian Ocean. In the last few years, Indo-French partnership has strengthened in the Indian Ocean and has resulted in India supporting French bid for membership of IORA and France for India’s application to

be an observer in the IOC.<sup>135</sup> Apart from India, Malta, European Union, China and International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF) are other observers of IOC. As the geopolitics in the WIO heats up, the role of IOC is likely to assume increased importance.

However, it needs to be underscored that this network of institutions fails to imagine the WIO as a unified geostrategic and geo-economic space, and consequently, no institution has been able to bring all WIO states under a single roof. Therefore, like the East Asia Summit, there is a need for a platform that will bring littoral and island states of the Western Indian Ocean on a single platform.

#### **XIV. Conclusion**

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world and has emerged as a centre-stage of 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics. It is also the busiest ocean with approximately half of world trade passing through its SLOCs and choke points. It is extremely rich in energy resources – with 65% of oil and 35% of gas reserves found in the region and also around 40% of world's offshore oil being produced in the Indian Ocean. The region is rapidly emerging as a critical strategic theatre owing to the economic, political and geostrategic issues arising in it.

The paper looked at the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region but limits its geographical coverage to the Western Indian Ocean. An attempt has been made to draw attention to the geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean region and present an overview of the engagement of major and regional powers in the WIO and also to highlight their long-term priorities and presence in the region. Two broad themes run through this paper: rivalries between major powers and the enduring strategic importance of the location of WIO. In the context of these two themes, the paper considered the military presence including bases of major powers, non-traditional security challenges facing the WIO and key regional organisations. The paper views the unfolding geopolitics of the WIO from an Indian perspective and is interested in the implications of regional geopolitics on India's foreign policy and national security. The paper considers India as a major stakeholder in the WIO, the WIO as an important constituent of India's maritime consciousness, and, hence, redefines the geography of WIO from India's perspective.

Geostrategically, WIO is the meeting point for several major powers (such as the US, France, China, Russia) which are keen to expand their military presence to cement and consolidate

their respective influences in the region. The intersection of tradition and non-traditional security challenges and critical issues such as those related to maritime security, piracy, terrorism, climate change, and governance challenges has led to a rise of a complex geopolitical web where the interests and objectives of regional and extra-regional actors are becoming increasingly coalesced. This has led to WIO becoming a potential hotspot for future power struggles between competing multiple actors to expand their influence and relevance in the region. While looking at the emerging dynamics of the major powers, it is, thus, equally important to look at the role of regional powers in the WIO.

The region has emerged as a critical theatre for the activities of India as well as for the West Asian countries. For India, WIO is important, not only because of its dependence on its SLOCs which facilitate international trade but also because India has emerged to be a critical politico-military partner for many of the littoral states in the region. It has projected itself as a “preferred security partner” to these states and has been helping them in building their own economic and security capabilities. The Indian Navy has been engaged in conducting extensive HADR activities in the region and has expanded its profile with its active defence diplomacy through port-calls, exercises, exchange of good practices and capacity building.

While analysing the engagement and interest of the West Asian states, the paper highlighted a complex web of alliances and counter-alliances that have emerged and are influencing the developments in the region. Amidst the West Asian states, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE and Qatar have demonstrated considerable interest in the region. The developments and activities of these powers, as discussed in the paper, have the capacity to further complicate the geopolitics of the region through efforts to enhance their influence and to serve their own respective strategic interests.

While the region is emerging to be a geo-political and geo-strategic hotspot due to the heightened activities of various stakeholders, the role that the non-traditional security challenges have played in shaping the dynamics of the region cannot be overlooked. As the region hosts world’s most important SLOCs, it also remains highly vulnerable to various challenges like maritime piracy, terrorism, climate change, IUU fishing etc. These non-traditional security challenges have played a twofold role – first, they have played a critical role in bringing many of these extra-regional states to the region and second, these challenges have been used as the primary rationale by these powers to continue their involvement in the region, therefore, solidifying their presence.

The regional organisations in the WIO have also emerged to be a crucial link in the regional governance architecture. These organisations have given a platform to various regional and non-regional players to collaborate and cooperate on issues affecting the region. The importance of these organisations was also highlighted by Prime Minister Modi during his speech at Shangri-La dialogue when he noted that “In the Indian Ocean region, our relationships are becoming stronger...we promote collective security through forums like Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). We are advancing a comprehensive agenda of regional co-operation through Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). And, we also work with partners beyond the Indian Ocean Region to ensure that the global transit routes remain peaceful and free for all”. With intense diversities and complex sub-regional security challenges that define this region, these organisations along with Indian Ocean Commission provide opportunities for multilateral engagements for furthering dialogue, cooperation and maritime security in the WIO.

In sum, the emergence of the Western Indian Ocean as a geopolitical space for the confluence of regional and major powers is obvious. The activities and long-term priorities of these players are defining the strategic reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The WIO presents immense opportunities for India to leverage its partnerships in the region in two ways – first, it allows India to expand its strategic presence through developmental, economic and security cooperation with the littoral states and islands in the region. And second, it can collaborate and cooperate with the major powers present in the region to address its own capability gaps and play a larger role in shaping the dynamics of the WIO. For India, the WIO remains a crucial theatre of strategic interests which would help it to increase its own global role and standing.

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<sup>134</sup> Christian Bouchard and William Crumplin, “Two faces of France: ‘France of the Indian Ocean’/‘France in the Indian Ocean’”, *The Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 7(2), 2011, pp. 161-182

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