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## **THE UNITED STATES' STRATEGY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: OFFSHORE BALANCING REVISITED**

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### **Abstract**

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a major strategic ocean theatre for the United States in the twenty-first century. The region is vital to secure economic and strategic interests of the US. The evolving nature of threats and the multidimensional rise of stakes in the region are also very crucial for US interests. Therefore, an emerging US strategic offshore balancing is of critical importance. Furthermore, there is a growing convergence of interests between the US and its allies in the Indian Ocean region and greater South Asia. This article thus, aims to explore the current US offshore balancing (OSB) strategies in the IOR to maintain its strategic supremacy and foster internal stability in the South Asian region. In doing so, this article analyses the IOR's geopolitical and geostrategic context as well as its growing significance in recent decades. It also discusses emerging security threats and prospective areas of interests for the US in the IOR. This article highlights the critical importance of non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, piracy, cross-border trafficking, and narco-crime-terrorism nexus, and the significance of growing Chinese and Indian influence in the region, along with the US' need for a strategic space to conduct counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Finally, the article argues in favour of a long term strategic interdependence in the IOR between the US and its regional allies. This would lead towards a cost-effective tactical and strategic supremacy of the US in the region. This article stresses that rapidly evolving circumstances demand the need for the US to also revisit its implementation strategy of offshore balancing in the IOR. Developing a comprehensive offshore balancing strategy based on shared interests with allies in the region is the way forward for the US.

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## 1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is becoming one of the major geostrategic agendas for the US. The hypothesis of an emerging US strategic offshore balancing in the IOR entails two significant questions. First, why would the US consider the IOR as a significant strategic front in the twenty-first century? An answer to this question will have to consider the evolving nature of threats and the multidimensional rise of stakes in the region pertinent to US interests, such as rising China, the recurring threats of terrorism, and other non-traditional security threats in the region. Secondly, what does the growing convergence of interests between the US and its allies in the region imply for the future of the IOR and greater South Asia? The answer to the second question contains a wider scope beyond securing the sea lines of communications (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean region. It brings India and China into focus and correlates US' long-term strategic objectives with the stability of the region. In an attempt to answer these questions, this article aims to explore the current US offshore balancing (OSB)<sup>2</sup> strategies in the IOR to maintain its strategic supremacy and foster internal stability in the South Asian region. In doing so, this article is arranged in three major sections apart from the introduction and conclusion.

Section 2 briefly analyses the geographical and historical contexts of the Indian Ocean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This section also analyses the IOR's geopolitical and geostrategic context as well as its growing significance in recent decades. By providing a historical exploration, this section reveals the evolving significance of this region since the Cold War era.

Section 3 discusses the emerging security threats and prospective areas of interests for the US in the IOR. The section identifies the critical importance of non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, piracy, cross-border trafficking, and narco-crime-terrorism nexus. Moreover, the section highlights the significance of growing Chinese and Indian influence in the region, along with the US need for a strategic space to conduct counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The areas of economic interests are also crucial for the US and its allies in the region. Therefore, the section also discusses issues such as dependence on energy resources and its relevance to the greater strategic objectives of the US.

Section 4 of the article argues in favour of a long term strategic interdependence in the IOR between the US and its regional allies. This would

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<sup>2</sup> Offshore balancing (OSB) has many definitions, but for the purposes of this paper, the author uses this term to refer to "minimizing the risk of U.S. involvement in a future great (possibly nuclear) power war, and enhancing American relative power in the international system." See, Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy", *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Summer 1997, p. 87.

lead towards a cost-effective tactical and strategic supremacy of the US in the region. This section analyses the emerging Indo-US partnership in a broader regional perspective, which would likely to have implications not only for South Asia but also for the Asia Pacific region. This section also discusses some of the potential challenges that the US might face in implementing offshore balancing in the IOR.

Finally, in the concluding remarks, this paper stresses the argument that rapidly evolving circumstances demand the need for the United States to revisit its implementation strategy of offshore balancing in the IOR. The maritime domain surrounding the greater IOR and South Asia is the biggest strategic hub in the current century where the interests of regional and extra-regional powers converge. Therefore, developing a comprehensive offshore balancing strategy based on shared interests with allies in the region is the way forward for the United States.

## **2. The IOR in the Post World War II Period: An Evolving Geostrategic Significance for the US**

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world and can be defined as the body of water between Africa, Asia, Australia, and the 60°S latitude.<sup>3</sup> The IOR is conceptualised as one of the widest ocean-basin water bodies. This includes the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Strait. There are 38 coastal states and 13 land-locked states for which transit to and from the sea is mostly oriented towards the Indian Ocean. This region covers an area close to 102,000,000 sq km, two-thirds of which is sea, thereby representing 20 per cent of the entire globe's surface.<sup>4</sup> It is an area of great diversity and contrasts in terms of politics, population, culture, economy and environment, as well as exhibits a complex geopolitical framework where foreign powers and local states' interests deeply intermingle.

From geopolitical and geostrategic perspectives, the Indian Ocean has long been neglected by the United States. The Atlantic and the Pacific were considered more significant and influential in political and strategic affairs. However, this reality has dramatically changed by the end of the 1960s. One of the reasons was the growing significance of the Persian Gulf's oil and the economic importance of the Indian Ocean's SLOCs. Secondly, the volatile regional strategic environment, America's military interventionism, China's emergence as US's long-term rival and the rise of India as a regional power

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<sup>3</sup> The 60°S latitude is the northern limit of the area covered by the original 1959 Antarctic Treaty. See Christian Bouchard and William Crumplin, "Neglected no longer: the Indian Ocean at the forefront of world geopolitics and global geostrategy", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2010, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 14.

accentuated a heightened need for the US attention to this region. The Indian Ocean began to attract the attention of the superpowers, the USA and the USSR, for strategic purposes during the Cold War era. However, a contrasting view upholds that the US has paid due attention to the IOR as early as mid 1940s when it showed its firm intention to secure access to the Persian Gulf's oil by negotiating and signing the Anglo-American Petroleum Agreement with the British in 1944.<sup>5</sup> It clearly illustrates the American and British longstanding interests in the region and towards its energy resources during the early years of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> In the same year, the US-Saudi Arabia cooperation had extended to the first American military interventions in the region.

The US and the USSR were expanding their rivalry over the entire region as the British started withdrawing from the Suez in 1968. The Soviet Union considered regional "instability" as an opportunity for enhanced political influence.<sup>7</sup> In reaction to the USSR's policy, the US simultaneously perceived the strategic and economic interests in the region. The superpowers started deploying navy ships, submarines and nuclear weaponry in the Indian Ocean with the goal of establishing permanent military bases and facilities.

Developments in the 1970s and 1980s ensured the long-term presence of the US in the Indian Ocean Region. Among these events, the second closure of the Suez Canal in 1975, the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, the 1971 United Nations (UN) Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, the fourth Israeli-Palestinian war in 1973, the first oil crisis of 1973-74, and the 1974 Indian nuclear test were noteworthy. Furthermore, due to 1979's Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-89, the second oil crisis of 1979, and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the IOR had transformed into a hub of crucial geostrategic importance.<sup>8</sup> These events made it clear that as long as the then Soviet Union remained committed to a policy of undermining Western interests in the IOR, the United States and its allies had a compelling reason to maintain the means of responding effectively.

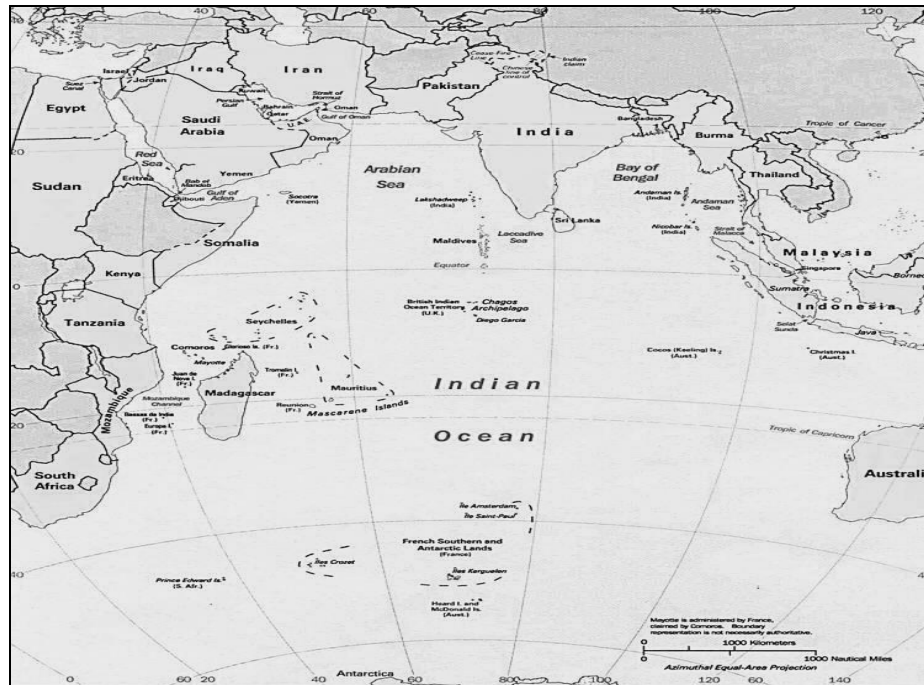
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<sup>5</sup> See Bouchard and Crumplin, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> This situation was better explained by Noam Chomsky. He mentioned that the Persian Gulf at that time was already recognised by the Americans as the "most strategically important area of the world." See, Noam Chomsky, "Imperial presidency/imperial sovereignty", *Canadian Dimension*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 21 November 2005, available at <http://canadiandimension.com/articles/3217>, accessed on 13 November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Instability reflects the Cold War tensions between the superpowers. See Walker K. Anderson, "Emerging Security Issues in the Indian Ocean: An American Perspective", in Selig S. Harrison and K. Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Indian and American Perspectives*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> For details, see, Chandra Kumar, "The Indian Ocean: Arc of Crisis or Zone of Peace", *International Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 1984, p. 238.



The post-Cold War period brought an intense and diverse new American interventionism in the region. Donald L. Berlin has argued that in the twenty-first century “no region is likely to play a crucial role as the Indian Ocean due to its combination of oil, Islam, and the likely rivalry between India and China.”<sup>9</sup> Apart from the conventional regional rivalry, the rise of non-traditional security issues, such as terrorism, trafficking of all kinds, maritime piracy, environmental degradation, and the socio-political turbulence in the Islamic world after 9/11 have played significant role in reconstructing the strategic significance of the IOR. Furthermore, the region has gained crucial strategic value for its energy-based resources, international trade maritime routes, and indispensable theatre of naval operations. In consequence, there is no way to overlook the strategic rivalry of the big powers over the IOR. Debate may exist in terms of qualifying the level of the importance of the Indian Ocean as the strategic focal in world affairs for the United States. However, there exists no confusion to explore its rising strategic context considering that the region is already very volatile, and peace and security will remain a great challenge in the coming decades.

<sup>9</sup> Donald L. Berlin, “Neglected no longer: strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean”, *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2002, p. 31.

### 3. Security and Economic Concerns: Prospective Interests for the US in the IOR

This section discusses the emerging security threats and potential areas of interests for the United States in the IOR. In doing so, the arguments and evidence for the growing importance of the region for US interests are based on evolving ideas of US maritime security and offshore balancing strategy. The US concept of maritime security in the Indian Ocean is characterised by four principal trends.<sup>10</sup> One is the ongoing collective security effort by the United States with its international partners, such as India, Australia, Singapore, and Japan, to maintain and strengthen their command of the sea. The second trend is the exertion of key strategic influences on certain moderate rivals and continental powers, for example China and Iran. Third is the unrestricted access to the Middle Eastern energy resources, and fourth is the broader counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions concerning Islamist militancy. However, it is not wise to view maritime security in the IOR from a traditional statist security perspective.<sup>11</sup> It is better understood by a mix of traditional security concerns and motives, and transnational non-traditional security issues. The later includes environmental threats, illegal migration, trafficking, and piracy.

Nevertheless, the maritime strategy of the United States takes into account America's grand strategy concentrating on offshore balancing in a new geopolitical and strategic context. One has to remember that OSB is part of a broader foreign policy paradigm and evolves with the context, space and time. Therefore, the remaking of OSB strategies in the IOR's context depends largely on the contemporary strategic needs of the nation. Offshore balancing is a strategy firmly rooted in the realist tradition of international relations.<sup>12</sup> However,

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<sup>10</sup> The author discusses these trends inspired by Berlin's argument on US long term interests in the IOR. See Don Berlin, "Sea power, land power and the Indian Ocean", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2010, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Traditional maritime security issues refer to those threats that hamper the national security of a state and originate from the maritime sources. These are freedom of navigation, security of sea lanes, maritime boundary and domain security, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. On the other hand, non-traditional threats are challenges to law and order (e.g., piracy and sea robbery; drug, people and arms smuggling; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; illegal immigration; maritime terrorism). These hamper human security as well as state's security. The significance of IOR considers the maritime aspects of economic security, energy security, food security, environmental security and human security. To understand the conceptual division within maritime security discourse, see, Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong, *Proceedings from The Indian Ocean Maritime Security Symposium*, Canberra, Australia: Australian Defence College, 15-17 April 2009.

<sup>12</sup> The debate between John Ikenberry and Stephen Walt is an interesting piece of reading to understand different explanation of OSB based on IR theories. See G. John Ikenberry and Stephen Walt, "Offshore Balancing or International Institutions?: The Way Forward"

there is a difference between the primacists and followers of the OSB within the realist tradition. For example, the primacists regard multipolarity as obvious and comprised of three or more great powers and believe in preponderance as grand strategy. On the contrary, offshore balancers consider multipolarity as a strategic opportunity and accept that "preponderance of physical presence would not solve the strategic crisis."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the burden of managing the security affairs of turbulent regions, such as the Persian Gulf, or South Asia should be reconsidered through transferring the responsibility to strategic allies in the region.<sup>14</sup> This paper argues that a comprehensive OSB plan is needed, instead of a mono-dimensional grand strategy based on preponderance. Therefore, the new OSB would enhance the relative power of the US in the IOR.

The strategic interests of the United States in the IOR have grown significantly since the end of the Cold War. First, the 1991 Gulf War contributed significantly in this regard. The terrorist attack on the US on 11 September 2001 and the global war on terrorism added new elements in the US national interests. The US intervention in Afghanistan has enlarged its strategic posture, which explores diverse concerns that are shared by prospective US allies in the region. Second, the United States has a vested interest in enlarging and strengthening its strategic partnership with Japan, Australia and India.<sup>15</sup> This also serves the US partnership with the Central Asian states. It is not unanticipated that these major allied nations may have parallel strategic interests in relation to their respective world views.<sup>16</sup> These countries may not always accept American preponderant moves in the region. On the contrary, the offshore balancing based on shared interests will bring a win-win outcome for the concerned stakeholders.

Moreover, the rise of China is a significant strategic and economic concern for the United States. On the flip side of the coin, the Indo-China rivalry creates

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for US Foreign Policy", a debate hosted by Christopher Lydon on 08 May 2007 and published in *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. XIV, Issue 1, Fall/Winter 2007, p. 14. For a better understanding of the OSB idea, see, Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, "A New Grand Strategy", *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 289, No. 1, January 2002, pp. 36-42, and Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Summer 1997, pp. 86-124.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Layne, "Offshore Balancing Revisited", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 2002, p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> India is considered to be the largest democracy in the world and a natural ally for the United States. Japan and Australia maintains mutual strategic relations from the post-Second World War era. See, Don Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

space for the US to counter a potential continental power like China.<sup>17</sup> China is alleged to be pursuing a “string of pearls” strategy of cultivating India’s neighbours as friendly states, both to protect its economic and security interests and to balance a rising India and the external offshore balancing of the US.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the pace, scope and structure of China’s military modernisation are giving its neighbours causes for concerns.<sup>19</sup> China’s growing dependence on the Indian Ocean to sustain its maritime power inevitably heightens its concern over the potential US-Indian naval cooperation. China’s acquisition of several new nuclear-powered attack submarines and additional diesel-electric submarines, and the introduction of a new aircraft carrier (the Shi Lang) reflect their long-term aspiration to establish a stained strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the burning US concern here is to thwart China from being preponderant over the US allies in the region.

In recent years, 80 per cent of the world’s increase in energy resources consumption occurred in non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) Asia and the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> The foremost consumers in this group are China and India, as they are the quickest growing non-OECD economies. As of 2006, 62 per cent of the world’s proven oil reserves were located in the Middle East, mainly in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Middle Eastern oil reserves supply the majority of the world’s energy supplies. With the growing energy demands, both the global and Asian dependence on the Persian Gulf has greatly increased - a trend that will continue in future. Under these circumstances, access to the IOR’s petroleum energy is a powerful national security interest for the United States and its allies. There is another dimension of the US interest in the IOR - increasing level of nationalist efforts to control oil

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<sup>17</sup> Francine R. Frankel, “The Breakout of China-India Strategic Rivalry in Asia and the Indian Ocean”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2011, pp. 1-17.

<sup>18</sup> For details on the “String of Pearls” strategy, see, Dean Cheng, “China’s View of South Asia and the Indian Ocean”, *Heritage Lectures*, No. 1163, 31 August 2010, available at [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2010/pdf/hl1163.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2010/pdf/hl1163.pdf), accessed on 19 November 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Quoting Australian Government’s Position Paper from Lee Cordner, “Rethinking maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2010, p.73.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Curtis and Dean Cheng, “The China Challenge: A Strategic Vision for US-India Relations”, *Background*, No. 2583, 18 July 2011, pp. 7-10.

<sup>21</sup> Energy Information Administration (EIA), *International Energy Outlook (IEO)*, Washington, DC: Office of Integrated Analysis and Forecasting, Department of Energy, September 2011, available at <http://www.eia.gov/forecasts/ieo/world.cfm>, accessed on 21 November 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Cordner, *op. cit.*, p. 69.



supplies by unfriendly states.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the United States government needs to be strategic in ensuring the interests of private stakeholders, especially the US oil and energy establishments in the IOR.

The most crucial US concern now is countering Islamist militancy and associated terrorism in South, Southwest and Central Asia. This challenge, in Samuel Huntington's words, has its roots in "the fault lines between civilizations [that] are becoming the central lines of conflict in global politics."<sup>24</sup> The US concerns are comprised of the rise of extremist Islamism in Pakistan and its consequences for the rest of the region, their dominance over the IOR's energy resources, the influence of Iran and its potential drive for nuclear weapons, and the deepening of Islamist militancy in the Horn of Africa. Further, maritime security has assumed a new dimension in the post 9/11 period. The importance of container security to prevent maritime terrorism is significant in this regard.<sup>25</sup> Threats are posed with an increased number of attacks by the terrorists and pirates in the ships as well as trucks carrying shipping containers leaving Afghanistan for Pakistani ports.

The recent Pakistani cooperation with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US experiences rough terrains. The Pakistan government had suspended NATO supplies passing through Pakistan and has forced the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to vacate the *Shamsi* airbase in the southwest of the country.<sup>26</sup> This is an outcome of Pakistan's review of diplomatic, political, military and intelligence ties with the US, NATO and International Security

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<sup>23</sup> This is better known as "new geopolitics of energy." See M. T. Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*, New York: Metropolitan/Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 2008, pp. 1-8.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> A US Navy search of a freighter in January 2002 led to the discovery of a group of Al Qaeda terrorists hiding inside a well equipped shipping container. The group escaped from the container shortly before the search commenced. See, Cdr. P. K Ghosh, *Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia and the Indian Ocean: Response Strategies*, Paper presented for the Center for Strategic and International Studies – American-Pacific Sealanes Security Institute conference on Maritime Security in Asia, 18-20 January, 2004, Honolulu, Hawaii, p. 4, available at <http://www.southchinasea.org/docs/ghosh,%20maritime%20security%20challenges%20in%20SAsia%20%26%20Indian%20Ocean.pdf>, accessed on 13 November 2011.

<sup>26</sup> The *Shamsi* airbase is used by the CIA to run drone attacks and other significant and classified counterinsurgency campaigns. See, M Ilyas Khan, "New crisis for -Pakistani ties", *BBC*, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15909051>, accessed on 09 December 2011, and "C.I.A. Leaves Base in Pakistan used for Drone Strikes", *The New York Times*, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/world/asia/cia-leaves-pakistan-base-ed-for-drone-strikes.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/world/asia/cia-leaves-pakistan-base-ed-for-drone-strikes.html?_r=1&ref=world), accessed on 12 December 2011.

Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan after the 26 November 2011 strike by NATO forces on a Pakistani border post. This declining relationship will hamper the joint counterinsurgency operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Additionally, maritime terrorism is a vital US concern because of its nexus with drug trafficking. Narco-terrorism is an evolving challenge in the IOR region. Iran and Pakistan form a major portion of the drug-infested “Golden Crescent,” while Myanmar and Thailand constitute the majority of the “Golden Triangle,” infamous for its illegal drug production and smuggling.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between small arms proliferation and drug trafficking is well known.<sup>28</sup> The use of weapons to promote extremism in the region through the drug trade and vice versa is a critical threat for the United States and its regional allies.

Therefore, given the developing context of the geostrategic significance of the region, the US maritime security offers the most compelling area for rethinking its offshore balancing in the IOR. There is no alternative for the US but to build a long-term strategic offshore balancing strategy in cooperation with its allies in the region. The US engagement should spell out a long-term strategic vision and facilitate region-wide security cooperation in the IOR.

#### **4. Strategic Interdependence in the IOR: Challenges and Opportunities**

This section discusses the contemporary US position in the Indian Ocean and analyses a potential framework for a strategic interdependence along with the local allies in the IOR. This strategic interdependence is a multilayered approach influenced by offshore balancing ideas and hinges on coordinating the interests of local allies with those of the US, thereby enhancing the strategic supremacy of the United States against its rival components in the region.

The contemporary US involvement in the IOR reflects how Robert D. Kaplan explains transformation in the US perception from the Atlantic and Pacific to the Indian Ocean. He identifies this perception as an “iconic change” in the new century just as Europe was to the last one.<sup>29</sup> Further, the tactical engagement of the US can be explained if one translates Sir Julian Corbett’s idea that “the real point of sea power is not so much what happens at sea, but how that

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<sup>27</sup> Suba Chandran, “Drug Trafficking and the Security of the State: Case Study of Pakistan”, *IDSAs online*, 2007, available at <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-sep8-7.html>, accessed on 13 November 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Research Report on “Combating Illicit Light Weapons Trafficking: Developments and Opportunities”, London: British American Security Information Council (BASIC), January 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York: Random House Publishing, 2010.

influences the outcome of events on land.”<sup>30</sup> The US's IOR maritime security initiatives stem largely from the need to stabilise states in the region, which is a significant transformation in its policy.

The policy transformation was reflected in the strategies of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard through the adoption of 2007 Maritime Strategy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*.<sup>31</sup> The tri-services' strategy clearly indicates the shift of the centre of gravity from the Atlantic and Pacific to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The US has deployed a large, powerful and relatively permanent naval flotilla in these waters. These include Combined Task Force 152 in the Persian Gulf, Combined Task Force 150 with responsibility from the Gulf of Oman to Kenya's southern border, and Combined Task Force 58 defending Iraq's oil platforms.<sup>32</sup> The US Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain. The US Seventh Fleet stays in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean to secure US interests in Asia.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the historical presence of US forces in the Central Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia and the Chagos Archipelago islands, along with other bases in Singapore and Bahrain, equips the nation for potential offensive campaigns in the region.<sup>34</sup> With such increasing visibility in the IOR, the US increases its naval links with key littoral states, in particular India, Australia and Singapore. There has been a shift of 60 per cent of submarine forces to the Pacific and Asia, and enlarging efforts of NATO's geographic focus to increase its security connections with US friends and allies in the Pacific and the IOR.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, it is critical to translate this heavier presence into effective offshore balancing - what Robert Pape calls “strategic interdependence,” a combination of the US ships in the Persian Gulf and islands in the Indian Ocean, and military exercises with non-Western forces on the Bay of Bengal and

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<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Frank Cass, 2004, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Department of the Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea power*, US Navy, 2007, available at <http://www.navy.mil/maritime/Maritimestrategy.pdf>, accessed on 13 November 2011.

<sup>32</sup> D. Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “Navy's Indian Ocean Folly?” *The Diplomat*, 04 January 2011, available at <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/01/04/-navy%E2%80%99s-indian-ocean-folly/>, accessed on 13 November 2011.

<sup>34</sup> To know Diego Garcia and the US intervention in the Indian Ocean Region, see Andrew S. Erickson, Walter C. Ladwig III, and Justin D. Mikolay, “Diego Garcia and the United States' Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2010, pp. 214-237.

<sup>35</sup> Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, “Global NATO”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 5, 2006, pp. 105-139.

Arabian Peninsula to support rapid deployment of ground forces, if needed.<sup>36</sup> This OSB would be a better approach, which will “rely on multiple regional and ideological alliances in different parts of the Indian Ocean.”<sup>37</sup> This policy should be a part of the US grand strategy that avoids a strategy of preponderance, which is burdensome and profoundly risky.

The US naval presence in the Indian Ocean is not expected to remain static. Progressive shifts in the nature and extent of US naval and military forces in the Western, Central, and Eastern Indian Ocean are required based on prioritisation of necessities. The rising threat of Islamic fundamentalism in these regions is showing propensity to grow in the future. Therefore, the US projection should be two-fold here: the ability to exercise military power against littoral states’ deep inland from the sea, as well as the capability to successfully maintain forward deployed forces to counter major threats.<sup>38</sup>

An internal Indian Navy study shows its quest for maritime power not only to be able to defend and further India’s maritime interests, but also to “deter a military maritime challenge posed by any littoral nation, or combination of littoral nations in the IOR.”<sup>39</sup> The United States explores this common ground with India and fosters joint military cooperation. The most desirable format for the US is the multilateral approach toward solving transnational crises and maintaining maritime order.

A broader inter-governmental entity can be created for strategic and maritime security dialogues. The major thrust of this forum would be to promote regional security cooperation in South Asia and among IOR countries. The forum would include major working groups that bring together regional and extra-regional countries to consider issues like both military and non-military capacity and confidence-building, as well as joint policy development. The Indian Ocean Triangle - India, Australia, and South Africa - should take the lead with the United States and incorporate other littoral nations. It would also include other extra-regional states like China, Britain, France, Japan, and Russia. The forum should come up with a wider strategic cooperation framework among the maritime and oceans security-related agencies, such as navies, coast guards, maritime law enforcement organisations and the like. The major role of the

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 2, March/April 2009, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, “US Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. XXII, No. 9, December 1998, available at [http://www.ciaonet.org.proxygw.wrlc.org/olj/sa/sa\\_98ror01.html](http://www.ciaonet.org.proxygw.wrlc.org/olj/sa/sa_98ror01.html), accessed on 10 November 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Indian Navy, *Strategic Defence Review: The Maritime Dimension - A Naval View*, New Delhi: Indian Navy, 20 May 1998, p. 34.

United States would be to provide technical assistance and expertise to the member states.

A complementary maritime security worldview on Asia would be helpful for the United States' offshore balancing. Maritime security efforts should also go beyond the escorting of American naval vessels and be expanded to create a broader maritime security framework that attempts to counter piracy, weapons trafficking, and the transport of illegal narcotics.<sup>40</sup> India, Australia, and South Africa should begin to develop such a comprehensive maritime security cooperation regime.

Nevertheless, the initial inquiry on the Indian Ocean's maritime geometry suggests that conditions are not very auspicious for shaping a mutually beneficial maritime relationship based on strategic interdependence. Four predominant challenges exist in implementing OSB. First, India is unlikely to be a stable loyal supporter of the United States as it tries to contain its adversaries in the IOR. India's independent standpoint on many issues and self-interest in the IOR predisposes the nation against any blind support.<sup>41</sup> Being a multiparty democracy, India's internal politics has a large stake in its foreign policy decisions and hence this bureaucratic decision-making in Indian foreign policy is not always in favour of US interests. Second, China can exploit its formal and informal strategic alliances with Pakistan and Myanmar that have granted basing rights to China.<sup>42</sup> This would counterbalance US's power, deter India's interests, and influence maritime activities in the IOR. Third, the security concerns in the IOR stretch across a broad and unmanageable spectrum. These threats are both at the traditional and non-traditional levels and are rooted in local and regional manifestations. Fourth, there is a near total absence of a multilateral approach to combat maritime disorder in the IOR. Bilateral and trilateral arrangements are very narrow in nature, and biased towards groups or national interests, which would overshadow US interests in the long-term.

The above cited challenges reflect that practical limitations exist in implementing offshore balancing in the IOR especially in the form of forming strategic interdependence between the US and the littoral states. The US

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<sup>40</sup> The idea of Maritime Regional Security Framework is borrowed from Amit Gupta, "The U.S.-India Relationship: Strategic Partnership or Complimentary Interests?", *Strategic Studies Institute*, US Army, February 2005, p. 45, available at [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub596.pdf](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub596.pdf), accessed 12 November, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "China and the United States in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Strategic Triangle?", *US Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3, Summer 2008, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Lee Jae-Hyung, "China's Expanding Maritime Ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24, No. 3, December 2002, pp. 553-554.

maritime strategy in the region may be hampered if mutual supports from regional allies could not be harvested and sustained in longer term.

Some of the strategies undertaken by the regional allies and the US strengthen OSB. First, India has strengthened its relations with Japan through enhanced military contacts and maritime cooperation. Recently, India increased its ties with Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, and Madagascar, providing these countries with offshore naval patrol vessels, staff and training.<sup>43</sup> It is also pursuing better ties with Vietnam to try to check Chinese naval influence and access to the Indian Ocean.<sup>44</sup> Second, the landmark Indo-US C-17 aircrafts deal worth US\$4 billion in IOR's maritime security strengthens strategic ties between these two states.<sup>45</sup> Third, there is an agreement between the Malaysian, Indonesian and Singaporean navies on the conduct of joint anti-piracy patrols in the Malacca Straits.<sup>46</sup> These are examples of developments that increase regional maritime cooperation and the US's involvement in the region as an effective offshore balancer. The United States should engage more in establishing joint maritime centres at the important ports and near ocean choke points. Furthermore, the utility of allied naval power should be exploited more by the United States.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This article argues that the constantly changing circumstances in the IOR force the United States to revisit its grand strategy from preponderance to active offshore balancing. In the second and third sections of the article, both historical and contemporary evidences demonstrate that the Indian Ocean is one of the most crucial geopolitical and geostrategic concerns for the US. To be specific, the maritime domain surrounding the greater IOR and Southern Asia is a big strategic hub. Therefore, the US has to extend its cooperation not only with India, but with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well in South Asia and other IOR countries to become an indispensable maritime balancer, which deploys the right number and kind of naval forces and, establishes task forces and maritime

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<sup>43</sup> Vivek Raghuvanshi, "India to Boost Island Defense to Counter China", *Defense News*, 08 February 2010, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4490278>, accessed on 19 November 2011.

<sup>44</sup> David Brewster, "The India-Japan Security Relationship: An Enduring Security Partnership?" *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2010, p. 95.

<sup>45</sup> Special Correspondent, "C-17 deal will strengthen strategic ties: Roemer", *The Hindu*, 08 June, 2011, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article2085209.ece>, accessed on 21 November 2011.

<sup>46</sup> See Joyce Dela Pena, "Maritime Crime in the Strait of Malacca: Balancing Regional and Extra-Regional Concerns", *Stanford Journal of International Relations*, Spring 2009, p. 5, available at [http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/SJIR\\_MaritimeCrimeStraitOfMalacca.pdf](http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/SJIR_MaritimeCrimeStraitOfMalacca.pdf), accessed on 11 November 2011.

headquarters that bring different partners together. The article also discusses comprehensive planning and potential challenges to the implementation of OSB. It argues that the US should increase its assistance to build the capacity of its regional allies. Local skills development enhances maritime awareness and facilitates countries' abilities to track and deter transnational crimes. In addition, humanitarian and civic assistances like post-natural disaster humanitarian relief mission should continue. This will have an indirect effect in the overall OSB strategy.

Finally, it is the non-conventional threats which are crucial in posing collective security risks to common interests of the US and its allies in the IOR. These risk factors provide incentives for the development of a comprehensive OSB strategy based on collective security in the region. These efforts may include: facilitation of collective security dialogue, establishment of maritime security cooperative mechanisms, and materialisation of the strategies at official, non-official and operational levels based on mutual interest and priority. Therefore, there is a great deal of offshore balancing that the US can manage to facilitate the natural confluence of strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region.