



***DON'T FORGET THE "INDO" SIDE OF
THE INDO-PACIFIC: HOW THE
UNITED STATES SHOULD APPROACH
THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION***

BY DAVID SANTORO

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The strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is considerable and growing. Consisting of vast and diverse maritime geography of several subregions, including the Indian subcontinent, parts of Australia and Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Eastern and Southern Africa; it is home to 2.7 billion people — over a third of the global population — with an average age of 30 years old; it is resource-rich; and it is comprised of some of the fastest growing countries. The IOR also connects peoples and economies worldwide via sealines and telecommunication fiber optic submarine cables; significantly, 80 percent of global maritime oil shipments traverse Indian Ocean waters.

The IOR, of course, faces major challenges, including actions by nefarious non-state actors, such as pirates, smugglers, and terrorists. The ongoing attacks by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Red and Arabian Seas that are [wreaking havoc](#) on global maritime trade exemplify this problem. Other challenges include the impact of climate change, which affects the IOR disproportionately, and growing naval

competition, notably as China is increasingly flexing its muscles in the region.

How should the United States approach the IOR?

The US approach to the Indian Ocean Region — ambitions and realities

The United States recognizes the importance of maintaining a peaceful, secure, and prosperous IOR. In recent years, Washington has embraced the terminology “Indo-Pacific,” as opposed to “Asia-Pacific,” and in 2018 it renamed the US Pacific Command the US Indo-Pacific Command. Even if US strategy documents say little about the IOR, several US officials have recently [stressed](#) that Washington is committed to elevating its engagement there, notably through new partnerships. Adm. Eileen Laubacher, special assistant to US President Joe Biden and senior director for South Asia at the US National Security Council, [reiterated](#) this commitment at the just concluded [2024 Indian Ocean Conference](#), an annual event spearheaded by the [India Foundation](#), which this year was hosted by the [Perth USAsia Centre](#) in Australia and supported by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

There are problems, however. The US bureaucracy is not structured to engage the IOR. The US Department of State approaches it through four different bureaus: African Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, and South and Central Asian Affairs. The US Department of Defense, for its part, separates it into three combatant commands: the Indo-Pacific Command, Central Command, and Africa Command. These divisions make it difficult for the United States to appreciate and address dynamics of the IOR as a whole, especially maritime developments.

Another problem is that the United States does not include the Western Indian Ocean or the

eastern coast of Africa in its conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific, unlike India, Australia, Japan, and a few others. The US framing of the Indo-Pacific coincides with the Indo-Pacific Command's area of responsibility, which ends with India. That further complicates the US ability to craft a unified strategy for the IOR.

Perhaps partly due to these bureaucratic and conceptual issues, US engagement of the region has been limited. Recognizing the IOR as a priority route and theater for US military power projection, the United States has of late [improved](#) its technology and facilities, notably its joint naval base (with the United Kingdom) at Diego Garcia, and [increased](#) logistics and supply cooperation with India, with which it wants to strengthen relations, notably as both countries worry about China's rising power. But the United States has been slow to roll out non-military programs and engage smaller IOR countries. It only has one "ship-rider" agreement in the IOR (with Seychelles), constraining its ability to promote security cooperation, and only three embassies and two defense attaches to cover seven IOR island countries. The United States also participates as a dialogue partner in one of the two primary IOR multilateral bodies — the [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#) — but not the other — the [Indian Ocean Naval Symposium](#). More worryingly, in terms of assistance for the development of small IOR countries, the United States is falling behind China, which is [investing](#) massively in ports, fiber optic cables, and other maritime infrastructure.

Adapting the US approach to the Indian Ocean Region

The United States, therefore, should take immediate steps to adapt its approach to the IOR. It should do so by embracing the region as a whole and ramping up engagement, notably by acting as a problem-solver and committed partner.

Embrace the region as a whole

The United States should begin by clearly defining its interests, goals, and priorities in the IOR as a whole and developing a strategy for it. That work, as mentioned, has not been done.

Broadening the US Indo-Pacific construct to include the Western Indian Ocean and eastern coast of Africa would be a good start. Not only would it bring the United States in line with many of its key partners, notably India, Australia, and Japan, but it would also help identify ways to implement the [US Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) in the IOR.

Meanwhile, the United States should probably steer clear of undertaking a major bureaucratic restructuring to better grasp, and act on, dynamics in the IOR because it is too labor-intensive and time-consuming. Yet the appointment of nodal points or coordinators for the IOR in both the US departments of State and Defense would be a good, easy fix to address the problems associated with the current US bureaucratic structure.

Act as a problem-solver

The United States could be tempted to engage the IOR primarily — even only — with an eye to countering China because, after all, that goal is driving much of its foreign policy. Some have made that case, [advocating](#) that Washington focus its competition with Beijing in the IOR because it has a bigger advantage there than closer to China's coastline. A blockade in the IOR, the argument goes, could help deter Chinese adventurism in the Pacific because it would force Beijing to devote resources to a distant area where it has disadvantages and trigger greater balancing by IOR countries, notably India, who would feel threatened by a larger Chinese presence in the theater. The idea is that horizontal escalation in the IOR could replace vertical escalation in the Pacific.

It is unclear that this approach would work, however, either at the required speed or at all. Balancing by IOR countries would also not be given because many have a favorable view of China, and even those that do not, are not prepared to go “all in” against China. Of note, virtually no one participating in the Indian Ocean Conference in Perth last week uttered the words “China” or “deterrence,” let alone in the same sentence. Even S. Jaishankar, India’s Minister of External Affairs, only took [oblique swipes](#) at China in his keynote address, never mentioning it explicitly. Besides, many IOR states are suspicious about, and some even opposed to, cooperation with the United States, and there is a deep tradition of non-alignment in the region.

Rather than “countering China,” then, the organizing principle for US engagement in the IOR should be “fixing problems.” The United States should present itself as a problem-solver, a country that can help address issues of direct concern to IOR countries. Although regional countries have different goals and priorities, by and large that means helping respond to non-traditional security threats, including, but not limited to, nefarious non-state actors; illicit trafficking of all sorts; illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing; or climate change.

The [recent US commitment](#) to do just that is a good first step, but words should quickly turn into deeds so that IOR countries can “see” more concrete deliverables, more regularly. In this regard, the United States should bear in mind that building partner capacity to respond to non-traditional security threats can have multiple purposes, and therefore multiple payoffs. Enhancing a partner’s ability to combat maritime crime, for instance, simultaneously provides tools useful vis-à-vis China’s maritime developments.

Be a committed partner

Doing more in the IOR does not mean that the United States will have to divert resources

away from other theaters or the Pacific. The United States can — and should — ramp up engagement of the IOR while remaining focused on the Pacific. In addition to repurposing some of its in-theater resources from continental to maritime challenges and maximizing its diplomatic and military visits to regional countries as it transits in the IOR, as some have [recommended](#), the United States can do more by building on its existing relationships with IOR countries and, more importantly, supporting regional leaders. So, the United States should present itself not just as a problem-solver, but also as a committed partner.

Partnering with India, the predominant IOR power, should be priority number one. The United States should build upon the recent flurry of cooperation agreements it has concluded with India and work out ways it can best support Indian activities in the IOR, be it through greater coordination and burden-sharing between coast guards to preserve freedom of the seas, joint work to strengthen regional connectivity in other ways (including via the ambitious [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor](#) or the [India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway](#)), cooperation to improve management of the global commons, or mere expression of support for Indian-led IOR initiatives, such as the [Colombo Security Conclave](#).

In so doing, the United States should let India be in the driver’s seat, both because Washington should focus on the Pacific and because of possible [“backyard anxieties”](#) from New Delhi about an overly active US presence in the IOR. Such an approach could benefit the United States in other ways. For instance, Ram Madhav, the President of the India Foundation, has [argued](#) that US appreciation and upholding of India’s primacy in the IOR would encourage New Delhi to “get involved in the imperatives of the Pacific region.” In other words, US support for Indian leadership in the IOR will

trigger Indian support for US leadership in the Pacific, a clear upside from a US perspective.

Of course, the United States should work with other regional leaders as well. A staunch US ally often described as the United States' "[southern anchor](#)" in the Indo-Pacific, Australia immediately comes to mind. So do other non-IOR countries, such as Japan, France, or the United Kingdom, all of which play important roles in the region. The United States should seek to leverage their roles to do more in the region, including to resolve longstanding issues, such as the Diego Garcia stalemate; some have [proposed](#) innovative approaches to the problem. The United States should also urge mini-lateral arrangements such as the Quad, a security arrangement that includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, to pivot to the IOR and perhaps even to develop ties with the "I2U2 group," a new cooperative partnership between India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

Alfred Thayer Mahan, the now famous US naval strategist, reportedly [prophesied](#) in the late 1890s shortly before he became admiral that "The destiny of the world will be decided on [Indian Ocean] waters." These words continue to ring true today, and it is thus high time the United States gave the "Indo" side of the Indo-Pacific the attention it deserves, even as it remains focused on the Pacific.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.