



Socotra's Strategic Moment: Indian Ocean Power Competition and the Implications for India

Dr. Mercy Vasantha

Assistant Professor of Political Science
Government Degree College, Atmakoor (A)
Wanaparthy DT

Abstract

Today Socotra Island is the focus of an intense geopolitical rivalry. The Socotra Island is a key point of the current geopolitical competition, in the mouth of Gulf of Aden in northwestern Indian Ocean. Socotra has been neglected by wider strategic thinking in favour of more densely populated areas and islands, yet its strategic location on important sea lanes linking crossways between the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and wider Indo-Pacific has caught the interest of great powers like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), China and the United States. The present article looks at the geopolitical importance of Socotra as part of Indian Ocean geopolitics, assesses the competing claims of regional and global powers and the implications of Socotra's militarisation on India's Indo-Pacific maritime security architecture and vision of a free, open and rules-based Indian ocean. Using the available research in geopolitics, maritime security and international relations, the article calls for India to reinvent a well-thought out and proactive multilateral policy to secure its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the backdrop of the multipolar and contested world order.

Keywords: Socotra, Indian Ocean, geopolitics, maritime security, India, UAE, China, Indo-Pacific

Introduction

For a long time, the Indian Ocean has been referred to as the 'highway of history' and is home to a large portion of global trade, energy supplies, and strategic communication (Brewster, 2014). Over the past few decades, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become the focus of 21st century great power competition, with countries in Asia, Middle East, Africa and the West trying to consolidate their presence and influence both over the sea and among the islands. In that evolution, small islands and archipelagos have come to play a key role in the exercise of naval basing, naval surveillance, logistic support and naval power projection, to the extent of being of strategic significance beyond their actual size.

Socotra's strategic significance has been known since 1502. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese astronomers deemed the island to be one of importance in any sea voyage of that area of the globe and for a brief period Portuguese sovereignty was extended over trade routes in the Indian Ocean from this island (Sheriff, 2010). It also had its recognition from the British East India Company which seized this island in 1834 and 1839 before they turned interest to Aden. The Soviets expressed interest and persistence in the Yemen and its facilities over the 1980s in the wider Gulf of Aden region stemmed from the long-term need for access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean during the Cold War years (Alpers, 2014). It is little that it today mirrors a century of great power involvement with this strategic archipelago, Socotra.

Socotra Island, an archipelago of four islands out under the administration of Yemen, is one of the most strategically sensitive in the entire Indian Ocean, some 240 kilometres east of the Horn of Africa and 380 kilometres south of the Arabian Peninsula (Schmitt, 2018). Located at the intersection of the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, Socotra guards the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which allows an estimated 6.2 million



barrels of oil to pass through every day (United States Energy Information Administration, 2019). Yet Socotra has increasingly found itself caught up in the regional game of power as the UAE has been in the land swelling over the last few years since 2018, bringing military forces and infrastructure structures to the archipelago, which alarmed Sudanese and international governments and items of great concern for regional neighbours and strategic analysts world over.

India's strategic importance lies in Socotra. India is a major stakeholder in the Indian Ocean and a nation with close civilisational, commercial and strategic connections with the Gulf region, East Africa and soon the South-East Asian region, with a natural interest in safeguarding free movement and ensuring the stability of sea lanes in the area and not allowing hostility and exclusion to create a military pool along or strengthening India's long maritime neighbourhood. This article explores the geopolitical aspects of Socotra's strategic significance, charts an analysis of the interests and strategies of key actors and attempts to draw out implications for maritime security for India and its concept of an emerging world order.

Socotra's Strategic Significance and the Contest for the Indian Ocean

The value of Socotra is mainly due to its geographical location. Its location is on the maritime international transport gateway between the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea. One of the busiest sea lanes in the world, this corridor accounts for about one-third of the world's seas-borne trade in containers as well as significant share of world's energy supplies from the Persian Gulf to Europe and Asia. (Khurana 2008). The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to north west of Socotra is one of the five most important maritime choke points in the world, alongside the Canal of Suez, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the Danish Straits (United States Energy Information Administration, 2019). The control, or very strong military presence, over Socotra would give any power the chance to watch and intercept the sea-lanes passing through this route, which would extend military reach and surveillance into a large area of the northwestern Indian Ocean.

The strategic importance of Socotra is not new. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese realised it was actually a strategic position in the Indian Ocean trade, and it was briefly occupied, but the Portuguese were not able to maintain a presence there. (Sheriff, 2010) The study also saw the potential importance of the island, and it took over from 1834 until 1839 when the British shifted their interests to Aden. In the Cold War period, the Soviet Union had naval units in the wider Gulf of Aden waters and had an interest in gaining access to facilities in Yemen, adhering to a strategic practice that relied on a control of the Red Sea/Indian Ocean routes (Alpers, 2014). Today's controversy over Socotra, then, is the latest round in the long-standing struggle of major powers for control of the strategically important archipelago.

The most significant milestone on Socotra's geopolitical path in recent times has been the gradual integration of UAE military forces and influence, particularly through securing ports for the UAE Navy and establishing military bases. A pivotal moment in Socotra's geopolitical evolution in recent years has been the gradual consolidation of UAE military presence and influence, including the establishment of naval bases and ports for the UAE Navy. The UAE had gradually increased its presence on Socotra, first gaining a direct interest in the island during the Yemeni civil war, when it was on a Saudi-led coalition, and much later in 2016, by assigning the UAE Centre to Socotra to resume its operations. Throughout the Yemeni civil war, which the UAE was involved in as part of the Saudi-led coalition, Abu Dhabi took a direct interest in the island, and in much later 2016, it was decided to re-establish the UAE Centre in Socotra. The UAE is believed to have deployed military personnel, vehicles and equipment to Socotra, establishing military bases and enhancing the airport in May 2018 (obstruction) as well as deploying its coast guard on the island (Cafiero, 2019).

These developments triggered official protests from Sana'a and concern from Saudi Arabia, which deployed troops to the island to try to appease the warring parties for a peaceful resolution. Abu Dhabi has



attempted an ambitious program to gain military bases and strategic advantageous locations along the Indian Ocean countries including in Somaliland, in the Yemeni-island of Perim (Cafiero & Karasik, 2017), and in Eritrea and Djibouti. The importance of Socotra with its dominating situation towards the approaches of the Gulf of Aden and its prospect as an air and naval base is perfectly suited to this strategic context. The episode has interesting implications for the stability of the IOR and the principles of sovereign equality of all states that guide the rules-based international order, especially the one of the strategically sensitive region in which the weak and conflict-stricken states are exposed to the strategic agenda of more powerful neighbouring states.

Competing Power Interests: China, the United States and Regional Dynamics

It is China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean as the most important developments in the geopolitics of the early twenty first century in the region. The Chinese Indian Ocean strategy is aptly called the Indian Ocean String of Pearls, comprising a chain of commercial ports, naval facilities and Indian Ocean diplomacy, with a string of the former beginning in Pakistan (at Gwadar) and extending across Sri Lanka (at the oppositional port of Hambantota), extending further through Bangladesh (at Chittagong), and thence along the East African coast down to Djibouti (Vietnam, 2012). The institutional organizational and financial arrangements have been provided by the Maritime Silk Road initiative under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has allowed China to further integrate economically and strategically with the IOR region in the name of connectivity and development (Brewster, 2017). China has never had a direct military presence in Socotra, only in Djibouti, directly across the Gulf of Aden from Socotra, but Beijing has been known and acknowledged to have consistently expressed an interest in gaining access to strategic maritime locations throughout the IOR (Ghiasi & Zhou, 2017). China's growing economic and security ties with the UAE and the UAE's ties with other Gulf nations establish indirect channels that could funnel Beijing's sway to Socotra. Yemen is a relatively weak state that has seen the entry of Chinese investment, along with the ambitions and interest of the UAE, and this provides an open space for continued and ongoing influence. The Yemen resembles a relatively weak state, where Chinese investment has found its footing, and from which its strategic ambition and interest have been transmitted to this strategically critical island (Cafiero, 2019).

Since the inception of the Diego Garcia base in the 1970s, the USA have continued to play an active role in safeguarding freedom of navigation and against the introduction of any hegemonic power in the IOR (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008). The successive American governments recognized the importance of the Indian Ocean with the articulation of the Indo-Pak strategy (United States Department of Defense, 2019). But Washington has been hampered by its alliance relationship with the UAE, a security partner in the Gulf and the larger drama in Yemen. The United States has been much more concerned with its Gulf partners than it has been with Socotra, a development that has allowed the UAE to consolidate strategically on the island (Schmitt, 2018). Such a strategic shift in the IOR landscape puts Socotra firmly in the middle of the power struggle between the competing interests of Gulf, American and Chinese powers, thus creating a fluid environment in the region.

Strategic Implications for India and Policy Options

India is in a special geography and strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Given its long coastline (more than 7,500 kms), EEZ encompassing more than one million square kilometres of ocean space and strategic interests in the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca, India has an existential interest in the security and stability of the IOR (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015). The vision for a Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 underlined India's aspiration to take a leading role in the security of the IOR and made New Delhi a net security provider and a proponent of a free, open and inclusive maritime order (Hall, 2019). India is facing up to several practical strategic issues in Socotra and the competition for Indian ocean island spaces largely brought in by the militarization of Socotra. The consolidation of a UAE or possibly China faced military force in Socotra has added a new layer of protectionism



by foreign powers on what India has always considered to be its strategic backyard, in addition to making it harder for New Delhi to have a good awareness of the sea and meet security challenges from around the IOR. Moreover, any disruption of maritime flow through the Gulf of Aden and Bab-el-Mandeb strait will have far-reaching impact on India's energy security which imports huge quantities of crude oil through this route from the Persian Gulf (Khurana, 2008).

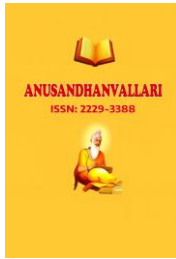
The relation between New Delhi and Abu Dhabi is deep and extensive, which adds another layer of complexity for India responding to the consolidation of Socotra by the United Arab Emirates. The UAE is India's third-largest trading partner, the home country for the world's largest Indian diaspora community of around 3.5 million Indian nationals lives in the UAE and to meet its energy needs is an important source of remittances and energy imports for India (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018). This association makes the structural puzzle for Indian policy makers. While opposition to the UAE's presence in Socotra might affect a strategically important bilateral relationship, acceptance of the militarisation of Socotra may create a precedent that may negative impact India's security concerns at large. In this situation, it is imperative to have a delicate diplomatic approach that would maintain the bilateral relationship while outlining India's strategic boundaries in the IOR (Cafiero & Karasik, 2017).

India's answer for the strategic challenge which has been created with Socotra's militarization should be pragmatic, multilateral and forward looking. India needs to move towards greater investment in maritime surveillance of the IOR region, which could include more coastal radar stations, maritime patrol aircraft, UAVs and strengthen intelligence sharing partnership arrangements with IOR nations. The Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which was set up in Gurugram in 2018, is a welcome development and there is a need to provide it with greater resources and expand its task-share (Indian Navy, 2018). India should also strengthen security cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) countries, USA, France, Australia and Japan and work out an integrated response to the threats in the IOR region. In this aspect Paris is a very interesting potential Indian partner, as France is also an Indian Ocean power with the possessions of Reunion Island and Mayotte. (Brewster, 2017). Further, India must further strengthen Yemen's diplomatic dialogue with the internationally recognised Government of Yemen and other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Oman with the aim of moving towards a negotiated solution to the conflict in Yemen while maintaining Yemeni sovereignty over Socotra. India's efforts to build strategic infrastructure on its own island territories, especially Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, should further accelerate in order to boost its maritime surveillance and power projection activities in the IOR (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

Conclusion

Socotra's geopolitical situation portrays a miniature version of the Indian Ocean Region's geopolitical debate being waged in the early twenty-first century. Its strategic position near the ports of the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, and the weak Yemen state and the aspirations of regional and global powers also make it a source of military rivalry with profound geopolitical consequences for small island states' sovereignty, for the stability of maritime trade routes and for Indian Ocean powers, such as India, security. This competition has now been heightened by the shift to a multipolar world order, with the inclusion of middle powers like the UAE and new powers like China, whose efforts are aimed at establishing strategic position of their interest throughout the IOR region, which is considered contrary to the concept of Soviet equality and Non-Interference (Acharya, 2014).

The militarisation of Socotra is a serious security issue and a geopolitical conundrum for India which has to weigh its special bonds with UAE alongside its quest for a free, open and rules-based IOR. This requires a comprehensive, proactive and multi-lateral approach to bolster India's maritime power, enhance security collaboration, and involve regional partners diplomatically, all in the spirit of the rules-based international order.



As the world is now a multipolar space India's capacity to manage such strategic quandary will be a key determinant of its ambitions to regional leadership and its vision of Indian Ocean stability and inclusiveness.

References

- [1] Acharya, A. (2014). *The end of American world order*. Polity Press.
- [2] Alpers, E. A. (2014). *The Indian Ocean in world history*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Brewster, D. (2014). *India's ocean: The story of India's bid for regional leadership*. Routledge.
- [4] Brewster, D. (2017). Silk roads and strings of pearls: The strategic geography of China's new pathways in the Indian Ocean. *Geopolitics*, 22(2), 269–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1223631>
- [5] Cafiero, G. (2019). The UAE's Socotra gambit. *Middle East Policy*, 26(3), 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12430>
- [6] Cafiero, G., & Karasik, T. (2017). Yemen war and UAE ambitions. *Middle East Policy*, 24(1), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12254>
- [7] Ghiasy, R., & Zhou, J. (2017). *The Silk Road Economic Belt: Considering security implications and EU-China cooperation prospects*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.
- [8] Hall, I. (2019). *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy*. Bristol University Press.
- [9] Holmes, J. R., & Yoshihara, T. (2008). *Chinese naval strategy in the 21st century: The turn to Mahan*. Routledge.
- [10] Indian Navy. (2018). *Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region: Establishment and mandate*. Indian Navy Headquarters.
- [11] Kaplan, R. D. (2010). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the future of American power*. Random House.
- [12] Khurana, G. S. (2008). China's string of pearls in the Indian Ocean and its security implications. *Strategic Analysis*, 32(1), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160801886314>
- [13] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2015). *India and the Indian Ocean: Renewing the maritime vision*. Government of India.
- [14] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2018). *India-UAE bilateral relations*. Government of India.
- [15] Schmitt, E. (2018, May 6). UAE moves troops into Yemen island of Socotra. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com>
- [16] Sheriff, A. (2010). *Dhow cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, commerce and Islam*. Columbia University Press.
- [17] United States Department of Defense. (2019). *Indo-Pacific strategy report: Preparedness, partnerships and promoting a networked region*. US Department of Defense.
- [18] United States Energy Information Administration. (2019). *World oil transit chokepoints*. *US Energy Information Administration*.