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Testimony

China's influence in South and Central Asia, Panel IV-

Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean

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Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and
Security Review Commission

May 12, 2022

Good afternoon. Commissioner Bartholomew, Commissioner Schriver, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on competing visions for the Indian Ocean. My testimony today looks at the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, underlines the need to dispel the assumptions about the ocean from the last century, analyzes the current power dynamics and provides recommendations on how Congress should approach and prioritize this critical region.

I. India's view of the Indian Ocean

The Indian government considers the Indian Ocean a key strategic and economic theatre, important for its diplomatic, military, and regional engagements. Historically, the Indian Ocean has been a critical theatre for engagement and interest for Delhi given it constitutes both New Delhi's immediate and extended neighborhood which could potentially impact its security environment. A secure and stable Indian Ocean is therefore central to New Delhi's security environment. India enjoys great strategic location in the Indian Ocean and considers itself a key regional and security player.

Despite such an important view of the Indian Ocean, New Delhi's approach, engagement and understanding of the region has however, been fairly limited especially after the end of the Cold War until the recent past. This, non- active approach emerged from a place of strategic inertia due to the lack of direct competition in the Indian Ocean. While the Indian Ocean was a major theatre for competition during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States (U.S.), it disappeared into the periphery of strategic conversations following the end of the Cold War. As the United States realigned its energy, resources and focus on continental sub-regions of the Ocean, such as the Middle East, the Indian Ocean experienced a vacuum from great power competition. While the United States was present in the region, primarily through its military base in Diego Garcia, the Indian Ocean came to be a transit route for its forces between Japan and the Middle East or as staging ground for military operations in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq. India and France emerged as the two key players in the Indian Ocean, each assuming a critical role in the eastern and western Indian Ocean, respectively. With U.S. priorities and interests elsewhere, Washington began to support and encourage India to take on a more leading role in the Indian Ocean.

Robert Gates, the then U.S. Secretary of Defense, suggested India be a "net security provider" in 2009 during his speech at the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore.¹ The idea of India being a net security provider, hence was an American thought. For India, by this point, the maritime domain had become a quiet and at times ignored aspect of its foreign policy conversations. The lack of a competition in what it considered its 'area of strategic influence' meant India had established itself as a key partner for most of its neighbors in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy too, was one of the most active primary players in the Indian Ocean allowing New Delhi to establish itself as an important player in the region quickly.

¹ See "India as a Net Security Provider: Concept and Impediments." RSIS, August 2014. https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB_140903_India-Net-Security.pdf

The importance of the maritime domain and the Indian Ocean as an essential strategic theatre is re-emerging in Indian strategic calculations today again, after a period of lull, mainly due to growing competition with China.

Despite political hesitations where Indian leadership failed to recognize the importance of its maritime environment, the Indian Navy has always prioritized the Indian Ocean as an important theatre. It is a key trading route and home to chokepoints critical for energy transitions. (See image 1). From a naval and maritime perspective, the Indian Navy understands the importance of the region and the domain in both establishing itself as a key player as well as in securing its interests. While the Indian Ocean is a critical trading route especially for energy vessels for nations beyond the region, Delhi's own trade and energy routes to the Persian Gulf are dependent on a safe, secure, open and stable Indian Ocean region. The Indian Navy today prides itself as a first responder to the region and discusses its capabilities, capacities and challenges in providing net security to the region. The Navy's 2015 Maritime Security Strategy lists shaping "a favorable and positive maritime environment, for enhancing net security in India's areas of maritime interest"² as one of its aims and objectives. While it is the political leadership who decides and shapes India's areas of interests, the Indian Navy considers the entirety of the Indian Ocean, from the eastern coast of Africa to the Straits of Malacca including Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and its littorals as its "primary areas of interests".

From a political perspective, India traditionally divides the Indian Ocean into the eastern and western Indian Ocean and prioritizes its engagements and presence in the eastern and northern Indian Ocean. The northern Indian Ocean including the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Persian Gulf constitute India's primary areas of interests. Among the Indian Ocean regional islands, India has traditionally placed greater attention on Sri Lanka and Maldives as its immediate maritime neighbors followed by strategic cooperation and interest with Mauritius and Seychelles. Madagascar and Comoros lie at the peripheral end of India's Indian Ocean outreach. Continental sub-groupings have played a significant role in this division of the both the Indian Ocean and the approach to its resident nations. While Sri Lanka and Maldives are part of South Asia and its sub-regional groupings, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros are part of Africa. A greater diaspora in Mauritius and Seychelles, in comparison to Madagascar and Comoros meant the Port Louis and Victoria have been part of India's strategic outreach and engagements in the Indian Ocean.

India is not the only nation guilty of dividing the Indian Ocean into continental sub-regions. In fact, it became a norm for most nations across the globe particularly after the end of the Cold War. However, to better understand the Indian Ocean region today, and its many dynamics, players and interactions, it is important to view the ocean as one continuous region, from eastern coast of Africa

² "Enduring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Strategy." Indian Navy, October 2015.
https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

to the Western Coast of Australia. In support of this view, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where I lead the Indian Ocean Initiative³, released an interactive map of the ocean to showcase its importance and the need to view it as one region. I hope this Commission and its members will find this new tool useful.

As I mentioned earlier, the view of looking at the Indian Ocean as one region is now slowly changing, and the Indian Ocean is re-emerging in India's priorities and strategic calculations. Delhi encapsulates its Indian Ocean policy through 'SAGAR', an acronym for Security and Growth for all in the Region, a vision from the Prime Minister's office. Below are some of the examples on how India's recent initiatives and policies toward the region cement its role as a key security player.

1. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) set up a new division- the Indian Ocean division in 2016 to look at the region more holistically and as one theatre, primarily through the island nations. However, at the time of setting up the division, Madagascar and Comoros were not included. MEA later revised its policy and placed the two islands in the division in 2019, a reflection of its expanding and strengthening Indian Ocean outreach.
2. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 went to three of the six Indian Ocean islands- Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles signaling renewed interest toward the islands. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Sri Lanka came after a gap of 28 years from an Indian Prime Minister. Today, high level visits from India to the islands are frequent and regular with Prime Minister Modi choosing Maldives as his first overseas visit after his party's re-election in 2019. Apart from regional structures such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), India continues to engage with its maritime neighbors at the senior officials level such as the Colombo Security Conclave.⁴
3. In an effort to emphasize the importance of its neighborhood in India's foreign policy while underlining Delhi's commitment to regional security, India follows a "Neighborhood first" policy which includes Sri Lanka and Maldives in the Indian Ocean.
4. Bolstering its capacity building efforts in the region, India has set up coastal radar system and stations in collaboration with Maldives, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles. India has

³ Indian Ocean Initiative. <https://carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/IndianOceanInitiative>

⁴ The Colombo Security Conclave began as consultations between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives at the level of National Security Advisors. The 2022 edition saw Mauritius participate in the conclave and Bangladesh and Seychelles as observers. See, "Joint Press Statement of the 5th NSA Level Meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave held on 09 – 10 March 2022, in Maldives." March 10, 2022, <https://mfa.gov.lk/5th-nsa-level-meeting/#:~:text=Delegations%20of%20the%20founding%20members,10%20March%202022%20in%20Maldives>.

also offered similar assistance to Myanmar and Bangladesh for better maritime domain awareness.

5. India also seeks to maximize its maritime partnerships in the region through collaborations creating platforms and initiatives to address key challenges of the region. The Indian Ocean region frequently faces strong natural disasters with many island nations identifying climate change as the primary security challenge. Delhi in partnership with friends such as Australia and France have announced and spearheaded initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, Coalition for Disaster resilient Infrastructure, International Solar Alliance.
6. As a response to the ongoing pandemic, India in May 2020, launched “Mission Sagar” sending emergency medicines, food, along with Medical Assistance teams to its Indian Ocean neighbors -Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros.
7. The Indian Navy continues to lead New Delhi’s efforts on Indian Ocean engagements. The Navy prides itself as the ‘first responder’ in the region, deploying quickly and offering Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The Indian Navy’s role as a key player in HADR has been growing since its relief efforts during the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, where India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. coordinated with its operations.
8. The Navy has also been playing a role in leading regional security efforts both by strengthening its own capabilities as well as countries in the region. One such effort is establishing the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), started in 2007, the first regional framework aimed at structuring information sharing on white shipping and addressing threats such as illegal fishing, drug smuggling and human trafficking.
9. In 2007, the Indian Navy launched its Mission Based Deployment, to increase its presence and visibility across the Indian Ocean.⁵ Under the initiative, the navy aims to be present across seven key areas in the Indian Ocean to enhance its role as a key security player. (See image 2)

As shown above, India has a keen interest in playing an active role and increasing capabilities in the Indian Ocean region. A strategic advantage for New Delhi is its geography and historical and political ties with littorals and islands in the Indian Ocean. While geography is one of India’s biggest advantages in the Indian Ocean, it is also a major challenge for New Delhi. The

⁵ Darshana M. Baruah “India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi’s Theater of Opportunity.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/india-in-indo-pacific-new-delhi-s-theater-of-opportunity-pub-82205>.

maritime geography is often overshadowed by India's physical boundaries with Pakistan and China along with its northern borders.

As India traditionally has faced bigger threats along its continental borders, the maritime domain is often ignored and neglected. Take for example its defense budget. The Indian Navy's share of the defense budget is at the bottom of its all three services. The Indian Navy's budget often accounts to approximately 14% of the defense budget. This year, it saw a jump to 19%, a considerable hike given the Navy does not enjoy the same priorities as its Army and Air Force counterparts.

The Indian Ocean region is vast, spanning the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of Australia. While the Indian Navy is not very visible close to Australian waters, it certainly is present between Horn of Africa and the Straits of Malacca. The Navy's biggest challenges lie in the western Indian Ocean, a long distance away from Indian shores. In the absence of overseas military facilities, the Indian Navy stands to benefit from agreements such as the Logistics Exchange pacts increasing the Navy's ability to deploy to and sustain presence across the vast Indian Ocean region.

While the maritime domain, and the Indian Ocean is regaining its prominence in Indian foreign policy considerations, the competition in the region at time outpaces Delhi's ability to respond. This stems from the Indian Ocean missing from Delhi's political conversations as a strategic space for decades. While India has made significant developments in the last five years in correcting its policy approach to the region, partnerships will still come to play a big role in keeping the Indian Ocean secure and stable, particularly in the western Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy too will need naval partnerships to address new challenges and strengthen its capabilities ranging from anti-submarine warfare to maritime domain awareness.

II. China in the Indian Ocean

Chinese activities in the South China Sea and the prominence of the Pacific region in Washington's security calculations have, to an extent, undermined the importance of the Indian Ocean region to China's maritime ambitions. The Indian Ocean is a key trading route for China's energy supplies and routes, making it also the theatre of vulnerabilities.

The U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD) "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021" identifies the top 10 crude oil suppliers for Beijing.⁶ Out of the 10, the route to nine of its suppliers is through the Indian Ocean region. Securing these critical Sea

⁶ "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China." Department of Defense. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>

Lines of Communications (SLOCs) will be a key priority for Beijing as it continues its engagements and presence across the region.

China is expanding its reach in the Indian Ocean. In 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in the Indian Ocean, in Djibouti. Unfortunately, most governments divide the Indian Ocean into continental sub-regions and thus, classified the Chinese facility in Djibouti as an African development rather than an Indian Ocean development.

When viewed as one region, it helps identify Beijing's commitment, interests, and priorities in the Indian Ocean. For example, China is the only country with an embassy in each of the six island nations in the region. In comparison, Washington has only three embassies (in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Madagascar), with two defense attachés covering the six islands, which span the entire Indian Ocean from Sri Lanka to the Mozambique Channel.⁷ It is also important to dispel assumptions which point toward China as a new player in the region. China could be a new military player in the Indian Ocean, but it certainly is neither a new political nor diplomatic player in the Indian Ocean. In fact, while the United States, France and India exercised strategic inertia toward the region, Beijing quietly continued to deepen and strengthen its engagements across the entire region, from western to eastern Indian Ocean, through economic, diplomatic, political, and now military engagements.

The Indian political and military bureaucracies (with the exception of the Navy) usually are concerned about direct defense engagements between Beijing and its partners in the region. The Indian leadership relies on its own geographic advantages and China's disadvantages in the Indian Ocean. Some instance where Indian leadership have expressed concern and caution include Chinese deployment of submarines for its anti-piracy missions in Horn of Africa and submarine docking in Sri Lanka. Increasing military engagements such as the submarine deal between China and Bangladesh also raise concerns in Delhi. For China however, these engagements are critical to establishing its role as a credible security player and partner to its friends in the region. The Indian Ocean is also critical for Chinese deployments and engagements with African nations, and we are likely to see greater and stronger Chinese presence in the region within the coming decade. The Indian Ocean is both an important theatre for China in establishing itself as a credible security actor as well as to secure its interests and protect its maritime vulnerabilities.

In the next 5-10 years, the region will likely see another Chinese military facility in the Indian Ocean as well as the deployment of its aircraft carrier. This development would naturally intensify the growing maritime competition between India and China. Establishing an additional naval facility in the Indian Ocean will allow Beijing to address some of its geographic disadvantages in the region. Combined with its presence and engagements in the South China Sea and the Pacific, the ability to secure its SLOCs in the Indian Ocean will significantly add to Chinese capabilities in the

⁷ Darshana M. Baruah, "Showing up is half the battle: U.S. maritime forces in the Indian Ocean", *War on the Rocks*, March 18, 2021 <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/showing-up-is-half-the-battle-u-s-maritime-forces-in-the-indian-ocean/>

Indo-Pacific. An additional Chinese military facility in the Indian Ocean is not a matter of ‘if’ but a matter of ‘when’. While the eastern Indian Ocean is widely assumed to be the space for the next Chinese base, I would put the eastern coast of Africa as an equal possibility, if not more likely.

From a region perspective, China has been a welcomed additional player for the region, changing the geopolitical dynamics of the Indian Ocean. Unlike in the South China Sea, Beijing has no territorial disputes in the region (see image 2) making Beijing a welcome alternative to western powers with sovereignty disputes in the region stemming from colonial period. China also does fairly well on the question of rules based international order as for the Indian Ocean islands and littorals, it is France, U.S., and U.K. that is viewed as intimidating by smaller nations because of its disrespect toward the U.N. charter as seen in the case of Diego Garcia.⁸ While there is no denying the role India and France play in providing regional security in the Indian Ocean, there is also a sense of discontent from islands states and smaller neighbors. Indian Ocean island nations and littorals do not seek to replace China with India as they key security partner, but they certainly are keen to expand their partnership and reduce dependency on a one single player. In that, China emerges as good and strong player as an additional and at times alternative security partner for many in the region. We have captured some these perspectives in an article titled “what islands have to say on Indo-Pacific geopolitics” To better understand island perspectives on the evolving geopolitics of the region, my initiative at the Carnegie Endowment established an annual islands dialogue bringing together the islands of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Commissioner Schriver, you were there at the forum last year and as you heard, perspectives from islands on China are not always on the same lens as viewed by Washington or Delhi.⁹

A growing Chinese presence across its diplomatic, political, and military footprint is certainly a cause for deep concern in Delhi. India already is in a tense and volatile situation with China along its northern continental border. A strong China in the Indian ocean amplifies the Sino-Indian competition across land and maritime boundaries.

III. U.S.-India in the Indian Ocean

As mentioned above, the United States supports India’s role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. Washington and Delhi’s objectives in keeping the Indian Ocean region safe, secure, and stable provides a strong basis for collaborations in the Indian Ocean. Increasing competition with China also provides a common basis for better understanding of the strategic implications of China’s engagements in the Indo-Pacific. However, the United States and India differ in its view of the Indian Ocean. While the Indian Ocean is the priority theatre for India, it currently features in the margin of its strategic priorities for the United States. Further, the U.S. DoD divides the

⁸ See the Carnegie Endowment International Peace’s interactive map for disputes in the Indian Ocean region, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/indian-ocean-map>

⁹ See, Ocean Nations: An Indo-Pacific Islands Dialogue, an annual islands forum hosted by the Carnegie Endowment and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/20/ocean-nations-indo-pacific-islands-dialogue-event-7680>

Indian Ocean into INDOPACOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM. Since India falls under INDOPACOM's area of responsibility, there appears to be limited conversation between Delhi and Washington on developments west of the Indian Ocean. Incidentally, the western Indian Ocean is also the region where India requires further capabilities, capacity and partnerships. While the United States considers the Indian Ocean as part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, there is little understanding of Washington's interests, priorities, and capacities in the region. It is also difficult to understand Washington's understanding of Beijing's dependence on the Indian Ocean and therefore the lack of an Indian Ocean approach. To determine and underline initiatives, priorities and policy alignments between the United States and India, there is a need to first establish an understanding of the Indian Ocean in each other's strategic priorities.

Despite being present in the region, through its deployments and its military facilities in Diego Garcia and Djibouti, US naval and maritime engagements with the region has been limited. The United States Navy transits the Indian Ocean between its deployments to Japan and the Middle East and the 7th fleet and the 5th fleet. While it engages with countries such as India during such deployments, engagements with smaller nations and islands are particularly limited. The military base in Diego Garcia is strategically located for missions and deployments in the region, however, given the nature of the missions carried out from the facility, the United States is considered missing from the region. Additionally, most of the Indian Ocean islands have coast guards and an U.S. aircraft carrier in the region cannot meaningfully engage with the island nations and littorals of the region. There is great opportunity for the U.S. to engage with Coast Guard's of the region through training, exercises, and interactions. As I have written in a War on the Rocks article, the U.S. must do more to show up and be present in the region.

There have also been concerns about Delhi's reaction to a more active United States presence in the Indian Ocean, viewed as engagement from an external player. These hesitations come from the Cold-War era and from a time when Washington enjoyed a stronger partnership with Pakistan, a relationship Delhi has always been uncomfortable with. Today, the U.S.-India relationship has bridged many of these differences and enjoy a strong and strategic partnerships. There is far more communication, trust and shared goals toward the region, than perhaps ever before in the relationship. However, geographic priorities for both nations remain different and there is still a need to better understand each other's maritime priorities and challenges.

The United States has not written a public Indian Ocean strategy in decades, and one that meets the defense and strategic needs of the 21st Century. To determine how U.S. and its partners can work together to secure the Indian Ocean, it is critical for Washington to determine its own Indian Ocean priorities and challenges. It is my strongest recommendation to the Commission to advise Congress on the need for an Indian Ocean strategy within its Indo-Pacific framework. This will allow its partners and friends to understand the gaps, challenges, and capacities giving way for a better framework for cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific. As far as strategic competition goes, it is my personal belief the Indian Ocean region will play a central role in determining China's place in the Indo-Pacific.

IV. Recommendations for Congress

I would like to make the following recommendations for Congress on the Indian Ocean region:

1. Initiate hearing on the Indian Ocean to understand the region and China's dependency on these waters. If the goal is to understand and manage a strategic competition with China, it is necessary to study and understand the region and perspectives from its littorals and islands.
2. Congress should mandate the administration to create an Indian Ocean strategy to outline its interests and priorities in the region. Further, the annual U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy should include a section on the Indian Ocean outlining how the United States seeks to engage with the region and manage its competition with China. In the 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy, a 19-page document, the Indian Ocean is mentioned approx. twice, both in the context of India.
3. Encourage the administration to initiate a desk or a division at the National Security Council to look at the Indian Ocean region holistically. Currently, there is no place within the U.S. administration, where developments in the Indian Ocean is discussed or monitored.
4. Encourage the U.S. DoD to breakdown the division of the Indian Ocean into artificial silos and create a more seamless engagement across its three combatant commands responsible for the Indian Ocean.
5. As a key partner in the Indian Ocean, Congress should encourage the creation of a position to place an Indian Navy official at INDOPACOM for better coordination and understanding of the Indian Ocean.
6. Consider an Indian Ocean Task Force deployed to the region with a mission to engage with the littorals and islands of the Indian Ocean show its presence, interests, and commitment to the region.

As a concluding note, I would like to emphasize the need to view and engage with the region beyond the 'China competition' lens. Islands and littorals have significant agency today and governments across the globe must be conscious of this. Framing policies primarily as a response to China's presence also undermines the nations commitment and understanding of the region. If leaders from the United States and India only visit the region after security developments with China, it sends both a wrong message and undermines their perceived commitment to the region. Engagements and interests in the region should last beyond the news cycles and despite China competition to meaningfully strengthen partnerships in the region. For that, it is important to have a comprehensive strategy outlining the framework for priorities, interests, and challenges in the region as a whole.

I thank the commission today for hosting this hearing on the Indian Ocean and it's been an honor and privilege to testify before you today.

Appendix

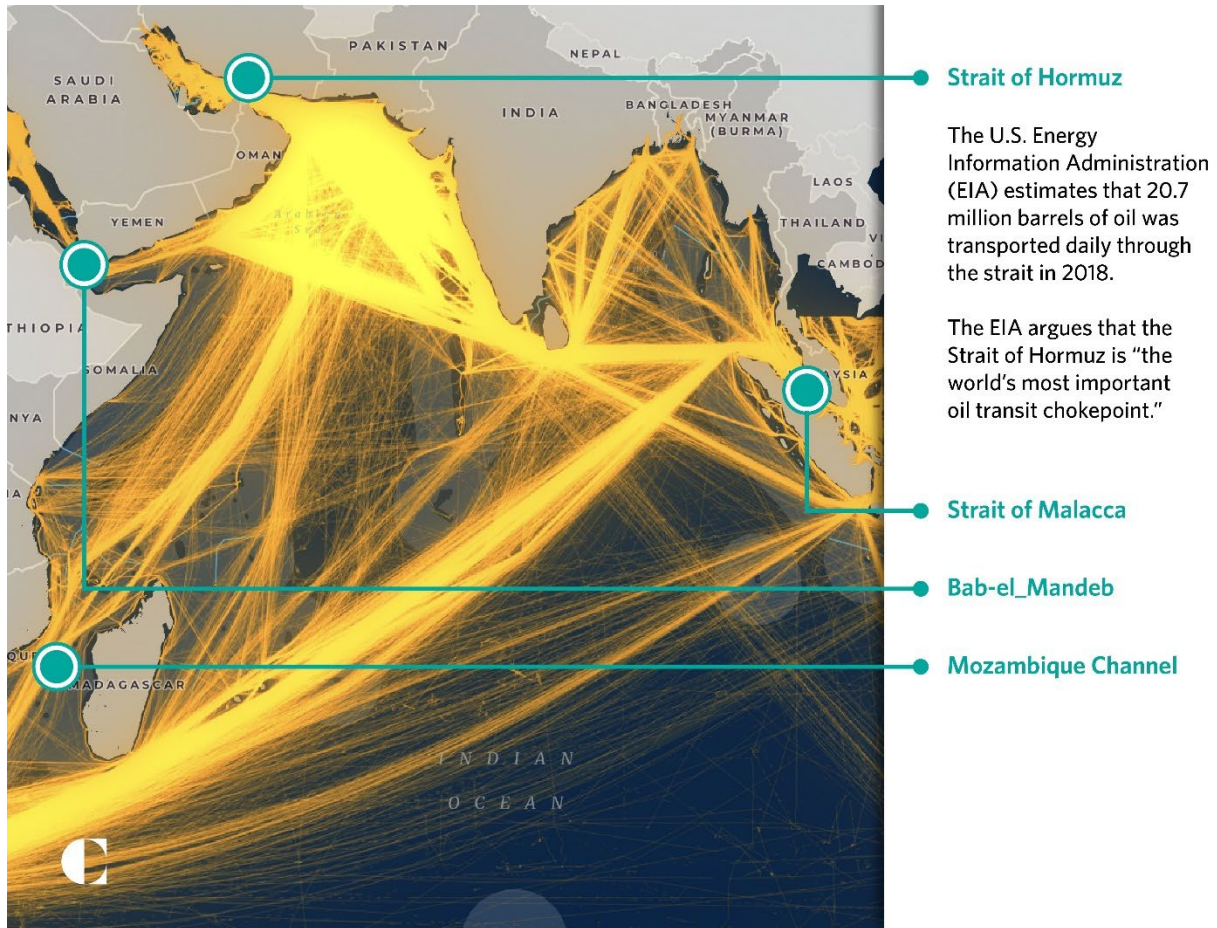
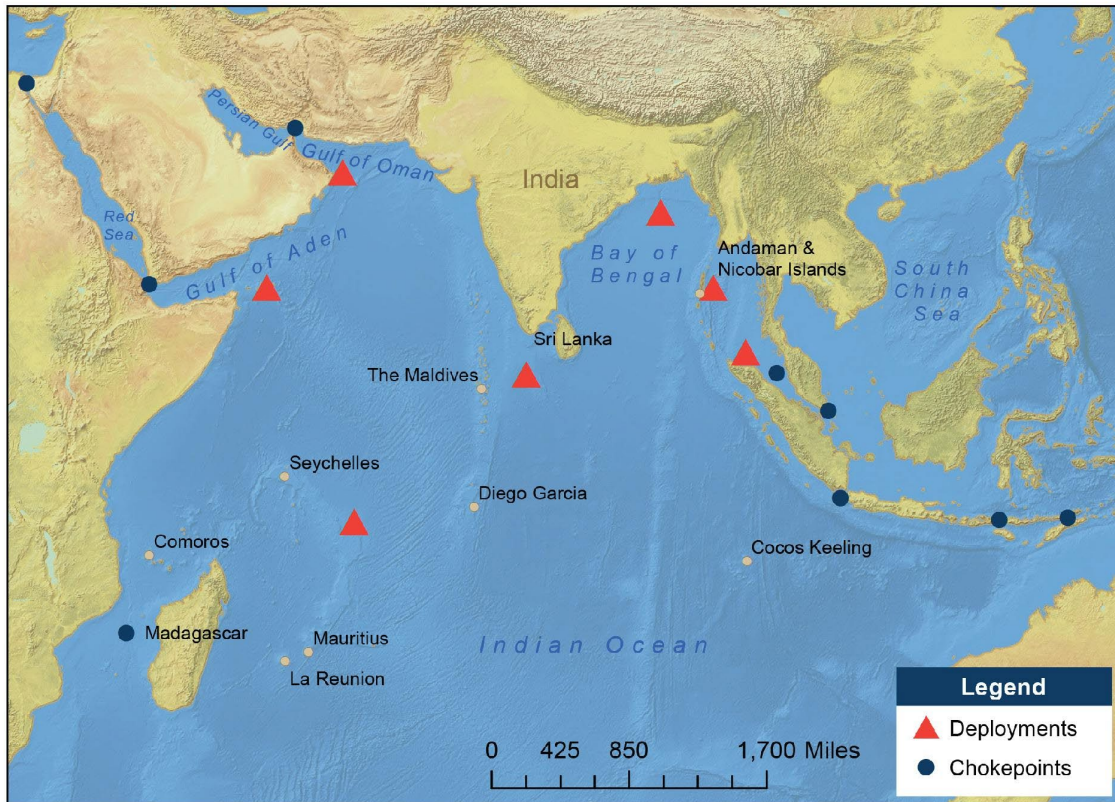


Image 1: Chokepoints in the Indian Ocean region

MAP 2

Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment



SOURCE: Directorate of Strategy, Concepts, and Transformation, Integrated Headquarters, "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," Naval Strategic Publication 1.2, Indian Navy, October 2015, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf; Press Information Bureau, "Year End Review—2019 Ministry of Defense," Government of India Ministry of Defense, December 27, 2019, <http://pibarchive.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=196160>; Sujan Dutta, "Indian Navy Informs Government About the Fleet's Reoriented Mission Pattern," New Indian Express, April 1, 2018, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/01/indian-navy-informs-government-about-the-fleets-reoriented-mission-pattern-1795404.html>; based on maps from Natural Earth, <https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/50m-raster-data/50m-natural-earth-1/>.

Image 2: Indian Navy's Mission Based Deployment



Image 3: Disputes in the Indian Ocean

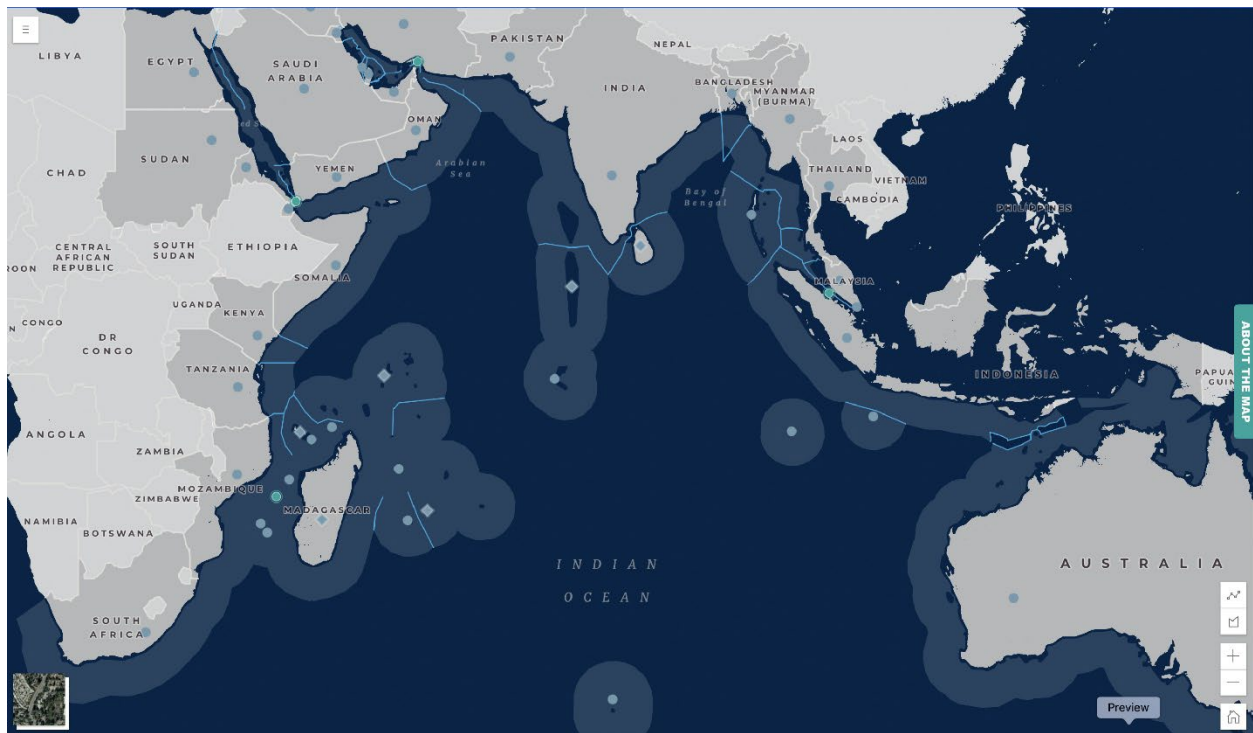


Image 4: A map of the Indian Ocean region to capture its geographic expanse.