

Geopolitics of Indian Ocean – II

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Manifest pedagogy: Many of the geopolitical issues of world as part of world geography at the mains. Indian ocean is emerging as the hub of geopolitical events. The overall profile, resources and issues related to geopolitics will help in answering mains and prelims orientated questions.

Placing it in syllabus: World's physical geography

Dimensions:

- Maritime issues of India
- Geopolitics of Indian Ocean

Content:

India has a long **coastline of nearly 7500 km and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of nearly 23 lakh square kilometers** and shares its **maritime boundary with 7 countries** (Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia).

Maritime disputes:

Maritime issues of India with Pakistan:

- India's maritime dispute with Pakistan involves the **demarcation of boundary along Sir Creek** which also provides the reference point for demarcation of maritime boundary.
- Sir Creek is a **tidal estuary** which exist on the border of India and Pakistan (Gujarat state and Sind Province).
- The **land boundary between the countries upto Western**

Terminus were **fixed by UN Tribunal**, but it left the boundary from thereon undemarcated.



Now the **dispute is mainly on 3 issues:**

- Demarcation of maritime boundary between India and Pakistan in Arabian Sea.
- The actual demarcation “from the mouth of Sir Creek to the top of Sir Creek”.
- The actual demarcation “from the top of Sir Creek eastward to a point on the line designated on the Western Terminus”.

As per the **Pakistan views**, boundary lies to the eastern flank of creek (i.e. creek part of Pakistan) and shows the **agreement signed in 1914 between Government of Sindh and Rao Maharaj of Kutch** to prove its point.

India has used the same document and **‘Thalweg doctrine’** to claim the boundary which says that, boundary line must be midway through a navigable channel. India argues that **as per 1914 document the creek is navigable during high tides and pillars which were installed in 1924 were along the midcourse.**

As Sir Creek frequently changes its course and this creates difficulty in demarcation of boundaries.

Maritime issues of India with Bangladesh:

There are three issues between the two nations that impede a settlement.

- The first dispute is **over the ownership of New Moore (South Talpatti) island** which emerged in the estuary of the border river, **Haribhanga** after the cyclone and tidal bore of 1970 and is still in formation stage.
- The second issue is over the **flow of the river Haribhanga**. India claims that the **main channel of the**

river flows to the east of the new island, whereas **Bangladesh maintains that it flows to the west**, thus making the island an integral part of the Bangladesh territory.

- The third issue is related to **demarcation of Sea Boundary** due to which the demarcation of territorial waters, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelves also got delayed.

Bangladesh went in for arbitration over the delimitation of maritime boundary under the UNCLoS on October 8, 2009. The Hague-based **Permanent Court of Attribution (PCA)** in 2014 awarded 19,467 square kilometers, **four-fifth of the total disputed area of 25,602 sq km in the Bay of Bengal to Bangladesh.**

While India wanted the determination of the boundary on **'equidistance' method** (means a nation's maritime boundaries should conform to a median line equidistant from the shores of neighboring nation-states), Bangladesh's claim was that it should be resolved on **"equity principle"** meaning that the countries adjacent to the Bay of Bengal would get proportional areas in the zone.

India's maritime issue with Srilanka:

Though India has successfully demarcated its maritime boundary with Sri Lanka through **1974 and 1976 agreements**, some issues are still there regarding the fishermen and Kachchatheevu island.

Kachchatheevu issue:

- As per 1974 Agreement, Kachchatheevu **island was given to Sri Lanka and special provisions** like pilgrimage rights **were included** but **fishing was not explicitly mentioned.**
- **Indian fisherman has claimed their traditional fishing rights** in the region which have been denied by the Sri Lankan authorities.

- In 2014, Tamil Nadu Government pleaded in SC to cancel the ceding of island to Sri Lanka, **Indian government clarified that, island was a disputed territory and therefore was given during boundary settlement process.** (In Berubari Union case it has been decided that settling of territorial disputes does not require Parliamentary approval.)

Fisherman's issue:

- **Sri Lankan Navy** started exercising greater **control and vigilance over Palk Strait** since Tamil Elam war.
- During the process many a times they had **fired on Indian fisherman** who had strayed into Srilankan waters which had infuriated dispute.
- Along with this the **ease on the restriction on Sri Lankan fisherman, use of high end technology by Indian fisherman has complicated the issue.**

In recent times, the Indian Ocean littoral has seen a great deal of **conflict, especially in the Persian Gulf**. It has also been **afflicted by piracy in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa**. The **major priority for Indian** strategic planning is protecting the **Sea lines of Communications (SLOCs)**, through which **83 per cent of India's crude oil comes**.

Geopolitics of Indian ocean:

The geo-political significance of the Indian Ocean stems from the fact that it is a centre piece in the wider **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**. The countries bordering the Indian Ocean are home to 2.5 billion people, which is **one-third of the world's population**.

The Indian Ocean is the third largest water body in the world that has **vital sea lanes of communication**. Around **80 percent of the world's seaborne oil trade** passes through the **choke points** of this ocean which includes the **Strait of Hormuz**, which provides the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to

the open ocean.

The combination of **economic growth and slowdown, military expansion, increasing demand for natural resources, demographics, variances in regional structures of governance** highlights the geo-political significance of this area.

There has been a gradual to an accelerated **expansion of maritime forces** and their capabilities in the region. The growing presence of extra regional powers and **nuclear capable nations** has further altered the existing security framework.

Politically, the Indian Ocean is becoming a pivotal zone of **strategic competition**. China is investing hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure projects across the region as part of its **Belt and Road initiative (BRI)**. Chinese state-backed firms are also investing in infrastructure and ports in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh.

Western powers, including Australia and the US, have sought to **counter-balance China's growing influence** across the region by launching their own infrastructure funds.

In security terms, **piracy, unregulated migration, and the continued presence of extremist groups** in Somalia, Bangladesh, and parts of Indonesia pose significant threats to Indian Ocean countries.

For the betterment of IOR, countries in the region need to collaborate to build economic strength and address geopolitical risks. Broader groups like Bay of **Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)**, **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)** have emerged which seeks to promote sustainable economic growth, trade liberalisation, and security.