

# **Maritime Security, geopolitics and planetary thinking. Consequences for Pakistan's foreign and security policy**

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Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

thank you again for the kind invitation to provide some insights into your debate on geoeconomic dimensions of the Indian Ocean Region and its relations to maritime security. It is a major question and hence it is good news that you devote these days to these discussions.

Please accept my apologies that I cannot be with you in person. I would have loved to discuss in person with you, and enjoy some good food together. I do hope we will get this opportunity in the near future.

What I like to offer to you in the following is firstly an analysis of the maritime security situation in the Western Indian Ocean, specifically reflecting on current trends. I shall then briefly comment on the strategic implications for Pakistan.

Since Pakistan is an important middle power in the Indian Ocean, the foreign policy choices the government makes will have significant impact on the region, but also in the wider Indo-Pacific and on a global level.

Let me start with some context. Maritime security is a way of thinking about security at sea holistically. It is to recognize that there are various security threats and that they intersect in important ways. We hence need to recognize the oceans as integrated security space.

In broad terms, maritime security has three dimensions.<sup>1</sup> First, an inter-state dimension. This includes concerns over competing territorial claims, boundary disputes, rivalries over spheres of influence, but also the phenomenon today known as grey zone warfare.

Second, the problem of extremist violence at sea. Terrorist organizations have exploited the maritime space in the past, and are likely to do so in the future. This might be to draw on the maritime as a route for preparing operations, or to direct attacks on marine targets.

Third, it is the issue of blue crime. Different forms of transnational organized crime have to be considered. This is crimes such as piracy, smuggling of various contrabands or humans, but also environmental crimes, such as illicit fishing or pollution.

Historically speaking in the Western Indian Ocean, it was initially the issue of extremist violence which triggered maritime security operations in the region. The installment of the Combined Maritime Forces for counter-terrorism operations was the clearest expression of this.

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<sup>1</sup> I draw on Bueger, Christian and Timothy Edmunds, *Understanding Maritime Security*, forthcoming 2023.

As we have seen in the past years extremist violence in the maritime is not an issue of the past, and several incidents in the region have sparked concern, including in Pakistan or the Maldives

Yet, it was blue crimes that led to a substantial new awareness for maritime security in the region. Piracy off the coast of Somalia was one of the vital triggers here. Becoming an uncontrollable problem from 2008, the region saw a substantial number of counter-piracy operations, many of which continue until today.

Important regional institutions, such as the military Shared Awareness and Deconfliction mechanism, known as SHADE and the diplomatic Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) were created.

Piracy is contained in the region since 2012, and in 2022 is seen as successfully suppressed. This was clearly signaled when the shipping industry announced in summer 2022 that the region is no longer considered a high-risk area for piracy.

Over this decade, awareness has increased for the detrimental effects of other crimes however. Two issues stand out in particular. The smuggling of heroin out of Afghanistan through maritime routes has substantially increased, posing a major health and crime problem in many regional states. Illicit fishing is not only increasing in the region, but is now considered to be a major cause for motivating communities to engage in other forms of blue crime.

While this already tells us that the maritime security challenges in the region are enormous. In the current decade two additional trends have come to the fore that call for new answers.

The first trend is that the region is increasingly interpreted through geopolitical lenses as a competition over spheres of influence.<sup>2</sup> The dynamics between the United States, China, India, the European Union and Russia, are increasingly competitive and tensions are building up.

The consequence is a growing mutual suspicion over intentions, a declining interest in trust-building measures and law-based multi-materialism, but also a growing militarization of the region.

The second trend is a discourse that almost points to the opposite direction. It is the rise of planetary thinking recognizing that humanity shares a common fate and that the oceans are in deep crisis.

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution from plastic and other sources, call for collective solutions since good governance of the oceans is in everyone's interest. This calls for maritime security forces to take an active role in marine protection, but also point to a future spectrum of tasks, which will include more search and rescue and disaster relief operations due to higher risks of extreme weather events.

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<sup>2</sup> See Bueger, Christian and Jan Stockbruegger. 2022. Maritime security and the Western Indian Ocean's militarisation dilemma, *African Security Review*, 31:2, 195-210, 2022.

Concerns over geopolitics and the planet will shape our future discussion of maritime security. We are just starting to see the impact of those both trends and what they might mean in terms of policy and strategy.

What does that imply for Pakistan's foreign policy and strategic choices?

Pakistan has historically been a major regional maritime security provider. It has pro-actively taken leadership in the task forces of the Combined Maritime Forces in counter-terrorism, piracy and smuggling operations. It has participated in SHADE and was a strong contributor to the CGPCS. While piracy is no longer the most important issue in the region, it is important that Pakistan continues its legacy as a major power in the fight against regional blue crime.

The geo-political trend raises the question of how Pakistan will want to position itself. Through CPEC the country is closely aligned economically with China. This does, however, not directly translate into political or security relations.

It is important that Pakistan does not fall into "the Sri Lanka trap", where economic dependency leads to limited political choices. Pakistan should maintain an independent position, and here it can arise as an honest broker negotiating interest and preventing further tensions in the region. If needed Pakistan should broker great power interest and play a role in ensuring dialogues.

The road to pursue this is via strengthening multi-lateral security debates in and for the region. This might be on a military level and in forums, such as SHADE or the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

Importantly, it should be also on a diplomatic level. One opportunity is the CGPCS which has recently changed its focus and renamed itself as the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities in the Western Indian Ocean. While the grouping is not yet on the road to serve us an important diplomatic forum, Pakistan could help shape the debate and take leadership to ensure that the forum becomes a site where not only blue crimes are discussed, but also geopolitical concerns can be raised, and suspicions be resolved.

India, Pakistan's regional rival, has recently signaled strong commitments to address maritime security through multilateralism. Prime minister Modi's speech on maritime security in the UN Security Council in 2021 send a strong message in this direction. Pakistan should take India by its word, and start initiating a discussion how collective arrangements for maritime security in the region can be formed.

The challenges of climate change, biodiversity and pollution point into a similar direction. These challenges cannot be addressed on a bilateral level alone. They call for strong regional and global agreements. The objectives of marine protection and maritime security are mutually reinforcing.

It is time that Pakistan develops a policy and a position of how it can contribute to marine protection by policing the regional waters and fighting environmental crime. It is also time to start planning of how Pakistan's maritime security forces will be impacted by this agenda. What future capacities will Pakistan need to deal with more severe weather events?

Pakistan's choices will have an important impact in the region. Maritime security and restoring ocean health are in everyone's interest and should be strongly considered in foreign policy and grand strategy.

I do hope that these considerations are useful for your discussions. I thank you for your attention, and look forward to feedback and questions.

Thank you