

Defining U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy

In the past few years, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a major center of geostrategic interest. The Pentagon's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) set the tone by calling for a more "integrated approach to the region across military and civilian organizations" and asking the rest of the U.S. government for an assessment of "U.S. national interests, objectives and force posture implications," which the National Security Council is now undertaking in preparation for the next National Security Strategy report, expected in 2012.¹ Key U.S. allies have also elevated the Indian Ocean in their strategic planning documents. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper, for example, noted that "over the period to 2030, the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to our maritime strategy and defence planning."² Japan's 2011 National Defense Policy Guidelines stipulated that "Japan will enhance cooperation with India and other countries that share common interests in ensuring the security of maritime navigation from Africa and the Middle East to East Asia."³

This official focus on the Indian Ocean has been fueled by public writings such as Robert Kaplan's 2010 book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*,⁴ written in the tradition of geostrategists Harold Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan, spotlighting how connected the United States is to the Indian Ocean through global commerce. Institutions such as the Naval War College, the American Enterprise Institute, the Lowy Institute (Australia), and the Ocean Policy Research Foundation (Japan) have also commenced studies on

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the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, as have comparable organizations in China, India, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere.

All of this strategic research and writing has yielded a long list of security issues that connect the United States and her allies to the Indian Ocean. These include the transit of oil supplies from the Persian Gulf to East Asia; the large proportion of fragile and failing states along the ocean's littoral (from Somalia to Burma); competition over seabed resources; climate change impacts on island and low-lying littoral regions; North–South conflicts over India's claims to an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 1.37 million square miles; piracy, terrorism, and the danger of “sea denial”; proliferation; great power rivalry (especially between India and China); and trafficking in persons and drugs.⁵

On one level, this heavy convergence of security issues is not at all surprising. The Indian Ocean is the world's third largest ocean and is surrounded by five continents and 40 countries—with all the myriad political, social, ecological, and strategic complications that entails. Yet, with all the attention on Indian Ocean strategy, one would expect the region was in imminent danger of falling under the sway of a hostile hegemonic power, of collapsing into a vast zone of failed states, or of some ecological disaster; this is clearly not happening. Precisely because the region is so vast and diverse, it is unlikely to fall victim to any singular state or non-state actor with hostile intent toward the United States or U.S. allies. Put another way, from the U.S. perspective, this is not an ocean region that resembles the 19th-century strategic vulnerability of the Caribbean under threat from Europe or the 20th-century Western Pacific from Japan. As the 2010 QDR notes, the largest power in the region, India, is itself likely to be a net *exporter* of security in the Indian Ocean in the future.

It is not enough to note that the Indian Ocean region is becoming more important or that multiple transnational challenges exist. The 2010 QDR was right to move this debate forward by asking the rest of the U.S. government to begin with an assessment of U.S. interests, objectives, and force posture implications in the Indian Ocean region; U.S. allies would be wise to do the same. To that end, what vital U.S. interests really are at stake in the Indian Ocean region today? What strategy and resources are required to protect and advance those interests?

U.S. Interests

One major error to avoid is applying a Pacific Ocean template to the Indian Ocean, including by assuming that the littoral states are looking to Washington to organize them. Even as countries ranging from India to Indonesia have welcomed closer bilateral security and political engagement with Washington in recent years, they do not have a history of American pre-eminence in their

region or a major regional challenge like China. Indeed, the Indian government deliberately excluded the U.S. Navy from membership in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) when it was started in 2008 on the grounds that the United States is not a littoral state.⁶ Nor is U.S. leadership in the Indian Ocean in and of itself a U.S. national interest—as compared to, for example, the Western Pacific, where key allies like Japan look for American proactive engagement and America’s military presence is indispensable to a stable balance of power.

Yet, while the transnational problems associated with the Indian Ocean may not lend themselves to an architectural solution or require U.S. regional leadership, there are clear and abiding U.S. interests at stake that should remain the focus of U.S. strategy. The most important of these is to maintain the Indian Ocean as a secure highway for international commerce, particularly between the oil-rich Gulf States and an economically dynamic East Asia.⁷ Interruption of that highway and the

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75 percent of East Asian hydrocarbon imports now transiting it from west to east would have a devastating impact on the global economy and on stability in Asia, potentially provoking security practices by China or other powerful East Asian states that would be deleterious to U.S. interests. Related to maintaining that commercial highway is the requirement by the United States to be able to swing forces from the U.S. Pacific Command through the Indian Ocean to deal with challenges in Southwest Asia, as occurred in Operation Desert Storm (1991) and subsequently Operations Enduring Freedom (2001) and Iraqi Freedom (2003). At this point, however, the Indian Ocean highway does not seem directly threatened by any hostile power or non-state actor, since terrorism and piracy are largely contained to littoral areas, and Chinese, Iranian, or other maritime power-projection capabilities are limited, at least for now. Maintenance of the highway and freedom of navigation will remain a longer-term concern.

A second and more immediate concern is to maintain freedom of navigation through the strategic chokepoints of the Indian Ocean highway—in the Strait of Hormuz on one end and the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea on the other. Both chokepoints are under growing pressure from openly or potentially hostile states (a third chokepoint around southern Africa and the Mozambique Channel is under less pressure, but remains important). Iran threatened on December 27, 2011, to shut down the Strait of Hormuz in response to economic sanctions over its nuclear program, and Beijing has aggressively pushed China’s claims to control the so-called “Cow’s tongue” of islets and rocks that make up

most of the South China Sea and lie directly in the path of sea lanes to Japan and Korea.⁸ For the immediate future, the U.S. Navy remains rightly confident that it can secure passage through both chokepoints, but the growing power-projection capabilities of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Iran's nuclear program are variables that could significantly complicate the U.S. Navy's mission in the not-too-distant future. Thus, while the Indian Ocean highway is not itself under near- or medium-term threat, it provides important defense-in-depth for countering threats to strategic chokepoints coming from outside the Indian Ocean region itself.

Finally, the Indian Ocean region should be important to the United States and U.S. allies because it could become a secondary arena for great power strategic competition in Asia, particularly between India and China. Geographically, the Indian Ocean provides Beijing with some asymmetrical advantages, since it can exploit the so-called "string of pearls" (Chinese-funded ports and related infrastructure along the Indian Ocean littoral at locations from Pakistan to Burma) to keep Delhi off guard in a way that the Indians could not easily replicate in China's littoral in the East or South China seas. India has dramatically improved naval and security cooperation with Japan, signing with Tokyo in November 2008 one of the only two "security agreements" it has (the other was signed with Australia in March 2007). It also has built up a strong security relationship with Singapore and undertaken port visits to Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay.

However, India's strategic purchase in East Asia is not comparable with the access arrangements Beijing has pursued in India's own backyard—primarily commercial at present, but with potential military application. In any direct military contest in the Indian Ocean, Delhi would hold significant advantages over China, but the ability of Beijing to put India off balance in her own backyard is a growing factor in the broader dynamics of Asian security—one that has the potential to intensify destabilizing rivalry or at least to make governments in Delhi more circumspect regarding Chinese actions. Either way, the United States has an interest in maintaining a favorable and stable strategic equilibrium in Asia, and the opening of a new front for great power competition in the Indian Ocean is potentially problematic.

These three geostrategic factors—maintaining an open Indian Ocean highway, defending chokepoints at either end of the Indian Ocean, and sanitizing the Indian Ocean as a secondary front in broader Asian regional competition—are the same factors that have animated U.S. policy toward the region for more than a century. That in itself is a useful test of the enduring nature of those particularly geostrategic definitions of U.S. interests and a starting point for considering future strategy. These factors also resonate with the strategic concerns of key U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia, and mirror the

emerging perspective of China which aspires to play a greater role in the Indian Ocean in the longer term.

Thinking through Sino-Indian Competition

Much of the recent excitement about the Indian Ocean among commentators and strategists focuses on growing Sino-Indian competition. But are we really witnessing a hegemonic struggle between Asia's rising powers for control of the highway?

There is no doubt that the security of Indian Ocean sea lanes is becoming more important to China, that this is one motivation for Beijing's plans to build a blue water navy, and that China's diplomatic, commercial, and naval presence in the Indian Ocean is growing steadily. Nor is there any doubt that together these trends are feeding fears in Delhi.⁹ It is important to assess these trends cautiously, however, and to weigh carefully their precise implications for the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region.

Are we really witnessing an emerging hegemonic struggle between China and India?

China's Long-Term Threat

China's ability to project genuine naval power in the Indian Ocean now and for at least the next decade should not be exaggerated. Most analysts assess that China's rapidly modernizing navy continues to enjoy a significant lead over its Indian counterpart.¹⁰ Deployment of PLAN warships to conduct counterpiracy operations off Somalia beginning in late 2008 showed Beijing had developed at least a limited capacity to project and sustain maritime power far from home, increased its familiarity with Indian Ocean operating conditions and multinational maritime interception operations, and no doubt bolstered China's visibility and prestige. Yet, there are reports that the operation severely stretched Chinese logistics.¹¹ According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Any conflict that involved supply lines stretching further than 200 miles or did not involve a contiguous land corridor would prove challenging for the PLA and would severely restrict its ability to deploy and sustain its forces."¹²

Meanwhile, China's strategists and political leaders remain preoccupied with developing the ability to prevent Taiwan from going independent and denying U.S. and allied forces the capacity to operate without unacceptable risk within the so-called "near seas." These are the waters considered vital to the defense of the mainland running from the northern Pacific through the Yellow and

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East China seas to the South China Sea.¹³ Official statements make clear that capability to operate in distant waters is a long-term aim to be attained gradually over time.¹⁴

Likewise, it is important not to read undue significance into the so-called “string of pearls.” Doubtless a number of these provide China with intelligence and other advantages, including limited logistical support for naval vessels operating in the Indian Ocean, prestige, and a degree of leverage with host

governments (although this can cut both ways). Indian commentators often perceive China's efforts to bolster closer ties with Indian Ocean states as directed against India, but objective analysts generally agree that these concerns are exaggerated and that the facilities in question serve predominantly commercial purposes, at least for the time being.¹⁵

Even if China does develop effective power-projection forces over several decades—including an effective carrier-borne strike capability and military support facilities in some of the string of pearls—those forces will operate in the Indian Ocean at a significant disadvantage. Long distances from ports in southern China would make for attenuated supply lines vulnerable to interdiction around the Strait of Malacca and other chokepoints—or on the high seas by forces operating from Diego Garcia (located approximately 2,200 kilometers south of India) or other locations including India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands (located about 150 kilometers north of Aceh in Indonesia). The “pearls” forming the string are dispersed and would be vulnerable to defeat in detail by Indian naval forces enjoying much shorter lines of communication.¹⁶ Indeed, Delhi could exploit China's heavy dependence on the “highway” for imports of hydrocarbons as a source of strategic leverage against Beijing—although this would be a risky game for all involved.¹⁷ In short, the PLAN would find itself facing challenges very similar to those that circumscribed the imperial Japanese navy in the Indian Ocean during 1942–1943 when it sought unsuccessfully to assert maritime control over the region.

One major variable in this equation is Taiwan. Chinese strategists recognize that control over the strategically vital island would give the PLAN unimpeded access to the Western Pacific.¹⁸ This is also very relevant to the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, however. A government in Beijing released from the political distraction represented by Taiwan, and perhaps emboldened by the boost in prestige it would receive from reunifying the country, might be more disposed to shift its gaze to the “distant seas.” And its navy would be freed to

redirect its attention elsewhere, including the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ It is with this in mind that the PLAN expanded operations from its major submarine base on Hainan Island in 2008.²⁰

So there is a longer-term danger—perhaps 20–30 years from now—that the PLAN could under certain scenarios develop something closer to the presence and power-projection capabilities necessary to contest the Indian Ocean.²¹ Beijing could look to go beyond its present limited posture to establish its equivalent of a Diego Garcia at some point. The Soviets never had the ability to dominate the Indian Ocean, but the possibility that they could transfer what are now called anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities from the maritime provinces to the Indian Ocean would have been a serious threat during the Cold War. A similar threat by China has to be considered a longer-term possibility. Of course, given the strong regional counteraction to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in 2010, there is a distinct possibility that Beijing would face significant counter-balancing among maritime powers if the PLAN in the future did seek to assert itself as a peer competitor to India or the United States in the Indian Ocean.

Nearer-Term Risks?

In the meantime, pressure on the Indian Ocean's eastern gateway is also growing. Beijing has upped the ante on the other claimants to the South China Sea (particularly Vietnam and the Philippines) diplomatically and through operations by the PLAN and related maritime services, and would be on track to become the dominant maritime power in that sub-region absent the United States.²² However, China's larger strategic and economic interests with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) suffered a severe setback in 2009–2010 when ASEAN states responded to Chinese assertiveness by embracing the United States diplomatically at the July 2009 ASEAN Regional Forum where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and key ASEAN members asserted the importance of "freedom of navigation." The United States also offered more military assistance through increased defense cooperation, particularly with Vietnam and the Philippines as well as through forward basing of a U.S. Littoral Combat Ship in Singapore.²³ Moreover, unlike Iran at the other end of the Indian Ocean, Beijing does not seek or benefit from direct strategic confrontation with the United States, retaining the Deng Xiaoping strategy of "lying low and biding time."²⁴ Still, Beijing has not retreated from its claims and is, in fact, expanding its shipbuilding program for extending power into the South China Sea region.²⁵

There is always the possibility that Chinese ambitions in the Indian Ocean will move out in front of Chinese capabilities. Failing states on the littoral could

draw in the PLAN as Beijing comes under internal pressure to protect its sea lanes, its investments, and its citizens. Growing economic interests and an increasingly nationalistic media and blogosphere will put China's incoming collective leadership under greater pressure to be seen to stand up for Chinese nationals and interests. The danger from failing states, in other words, is less that they themselves will obstruct the highway, but rather that they would draw in more policemen than is good for stability.²⁶ (It is worth recalling, for example, that the Russo–Japanese rivalry was intensified and the ground prepared for war in 1904 as both countries rushed to send forces as part of a multilateral response to the Boxer Rebellion.)

China's rising power and ambition therefore introduce the near-term possibility of a "new front" in the broader Sino–Indian rivalry and the longer-term prospect that Beijing might seek parity, if not hegemonic control, over the Indian Ocean highway. Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean is increasing in importance as a source of defense-in-depth against the growing pressure on chokepoints in the Strait of Hormuz and the South China Sea.

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The more immediate challenge is actually not from China, but in the Strait of Hormuz. While the U.S. Navy is likely to retain maritime preeminence in the Strait for the foreseeable future, there are variables that could drive Iran to be more ambitious in asserting its own control, including: the domestic political pressures on the U.S. Fifth Fleet basing arrangement in Bahrain; the potential deterrent effect of future Iranian nuclear weapons; Tehran's ability to horizontally escalate against "softer" U.S. or allied targets in Iraq or Afghanistan; the

proxy use of Hezbollah or Hamas to provoke broader Middle East complexities for the United States; and rogue operations by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Navy as internal tensions and weak civilian control potentially spill over into conflict against the West.

For these reasons, the United States will need to keep in place an immediate strategy of defense-in-depth and deterrence to respond from the Indian Ocean region to any Iranian activities against the Strait of Hormuz, and a longer-term strategy of dissuasion vis-à-vis Chinese pressures from the South China Sea on chokepoints at that end of the Indian Ocean. Both strategies will require sustained U.S. maritime presence, engagement with allied and friendly littoral states, and demonstrations of international resolve through multilateral naval exercises.

Components of a U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy

As the U.S. National Security Council attempts to pull together questions of strategy, policy, and resources related to the unfolding geostrategic dynamics in the Indian Ocean, it will be important to focus on the three U.S. geostrategic interests at stake—maintaining a secure highway, sanitizing great power rivalry in Asia, and defending chokepoints—and to avoid the temptation to load up the strategy with important but extraneous issues of transnational concern, or the usual American desire to “organize” the region. Starting with the basics, there are five interlocking principles that should guide the NSC effort.

Resources Matter

The Obama administration sent a reassuring signal to Asia by promising to “pivot” from the Middle East and not to take defense cuts out of the Pacific Command under President Obama’s new defense strategy.²⁷ However, the geostrategy of the Indian Ocean demonstrates why a global power cannot hermetically protect one regional command from defense cuts to other critical commands.

The fact is that a crisis with Iran in the Strait of Hormuz will draw capabilities out from the Pacific Command’s area of responsibility (AOR) because there will be less capability based in Europe. If the sequestration of the U.S. Congress Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction forces closer to \$1 trillion in defense cuts, then the Pacific Command’s ability to execute its mission within the Western Pacific alone could seriously degrade, let alone its ability to swing forces through the Indian Ocean. Notably, even the current plans would decrease U.S. defense spending by the size of Japan’s defense budget each year—a stunning number considering that Japan is the largest U.S. ally in the region and the sixth largest defense spender in the world. Engagement and presence in the Indian Ocean could be based from Japan or other homeports in Australia and Singapore, but deep budget cuts would affect how much the Pacific Command could actually engage in exercises and demonstrate presence in the vast region from the Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca. A reduced exercise program in Asia would run counter to the “pivot,” undercutting U.S. defense engagement efforts, interoperability with allies, and deterrence.²⁸ Current plans for defense cuts increase strategic risk: abandonment of the longstanding two-war force sizing construct, for example, means that the United States will have to fight longer and at greater cost in the event it does end up engaged concurrently in two major conflicts in different parts of the world.²⁹ These cuts also decrease opportunities for engagement and presence. Deeper cuts would be close to debilitating.

Diego Garcia and Australia Matter

Although the United States does not need a major new military presence in the Indian Ocean (a principle that will be explained in greater detail shortly), partial exceptions would be the cases of Diego Garcia and Western Australia. The fleet support and pre-positioned equipment at Diego Garcia will become more important for sustaining U.S. engagement and operations in the region to support defense-in-depth and pivoting along the highway to the chokepoints in Southwest and Southeast Asia, as well as a hedge against the very unlikely event of strategic divergence with India or a breakdown of the prevailing Indian-led stability in the region.

HMAS *Stirling*, the major Australian Naval base in Western Australia, and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (a strategically-located Australian territory 3,000 kilometers northwest of Perth, roughly midway between the Australian mainland and Sri Lanka), will also become more important for sustaining allied presence in the Indian Ocean. HMAS *Stirling* offers deep-water port facilities (capable of expansion to accommodate aircraft carriers), support facilities for surface vessels and submarines, and ready access to extensive naval exercising areas. In World War II, up to 30 U.S. submarines were based in the same area. With an investment in additional facilities, HMAS *Stirling* could support expanded U.S. surface and submarine operations in the Indian Ocean. This would present significant advantages in terms of defense-in-depth to protect sea lanes in the South China Sea, dispersal of increasingly vulnerable assets, and direct blue water access across to the Persian Gulf without the need to transit Southeast Asian chokepoints. A relatively modest investment in upgrading the existing Cocos Islands runway and facilities would provide a valuable staging point for long-range U.S. aircraft operating into the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

Balance of Power Matters

Sustaining and recapitalizing air and naval assets in the Pacific matters, but the United States does not yet need to plan for significant increases in its permanent military presence in the Indian Ocean (other than the abovementioned facilities at Diego Garcia and in Australia). A stable equilibrium can be reinforced precisely because the capabilities and intentions of the major maritime powers within the region align sufficiently with U.S. interests. U.S. strategy should focus on supporting Indian pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean and closer U.S.–India strategic cooperation, recognizing that there are realistic limits to this that stop well short of a full-fledged alliance. In addition, U.S. strategy should encourage and support closer alignment among the major maritime democracies in the region. Enhanced strategic consultations would be useful, in time including a return to the U.S.–Japan–Australia–India “Quad” concept. The four countries proved the utility of that cooperation in their joint response to the 2004–2005

Asian tsunami, but Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's proposal for a higher political-level Quad melted in the face of Chinese resistance and internal anxiety in all four capitals. That should not, however, have stopped continued coordination among the four at the level of policy and defense coordination.

The United States can also encourage federated capabilities among these four major powers by building on bilateral interoperability and increased bilateral defense cooperation between each of the other three pairs of powers. A U.S.–Australia–India trilateral strategic dialogue could be established now. It would have its own benefits and could serve as an important way station to re-establishing the Quad.³⁰ A strategy of gradual alignment among maritime powers in the Indian Ocean has three advantages: first, it helps to dissuade China or other external powers from seeking parity over India alone, thus securing the highway; second, it provides an arena outside of Beijing's most sensitive areas of "core interest" to demonstrate that Chinese assertiveness will beget counter-alignment strategies by other states in the region; and third, it creates capacity and norms for security cooperation that will discourage unilateral power plays in response to piracy, terrorism, or other littoral challenges in the Indian Ocean by China or other major powers. Implicit in this strategy would be a U.S., Japanese, and Australian decision that the rise of India is itself an inherently stabilizing development in the security order of Asia.

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The development of sub-regional coalitions and capabilities would also help to contend with littoral challenges from piracy and terrorism while also reinforcing the cooperative security environment in the region. Piracy in the Arabian Sea, for example, costs \$7–12 billion per year and the threat is increasing (the number of hostages taken per year increased from 163 in 2007 to more than 1,000 in 2010).³¹ There are opportunities for several layers of sub-regional multilateral cooperation, beginning with the U.S.-led Task Force 151, the main international anti-piracy group operating in the area, which Japan, Australia, and NATO countries (but not China) have joined. As a recent CSIS report notes, for example, parallel efforts could be encouraged by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) near the Arabian Sea.³²

Regional Architecture Matters Less . . . In This Case

While it will be tempting in an "all-of-government" exercise to frame a new U.S. Indian Ocean strategy in broad and comprehensive terms, it remains questionable whether there is an architectural solution to the problem

comparable to the U.S. approach to ASEAN or the Western Pacific. Addressing the comprehensive range of U.S. interests in the Indian Ocean might provide multiple points for engagement and cooperation with littoral states, but the U.S. government should be careful about broad U.S.-led Indian Ocean initiatives for four reasons. First, if the most important U.S. strategic interests in the region argue for supporting Indian leadership, then initiatives that undermine or challenge that leadership could backfire. Second, issues of seabed exploitation or climate change are areas where U.S. and Indian definitions of national interest often diverge, suggesting that these would be better handled quietly in bilateral or global forums rather than as centerpieces of an Indian Ocean regional initiative. Third, India's residual non-alignment pathologies tend to come out most often in multilateral forums rather than in bilateral cooperation or in mini-lateral efforts such as the Quad or the new U.S.–Japan–India trilateral dialogue. India's strategic culture is changing, and generally in directions that will underpin stability and U.S. strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region. That is the trend that U.S. strategy should reinforce. Fourth, the challenges facing the Indian Ocean region are simply too diverse, thematically and geographically, to be amenable to a neat one-size-fits-all architectural solution.

Taiwan Matters

One of the most important variables in the future of the Indian Ocean, it turns out, is Taiwan. An explicit U.S. strategy aimed at preventing peaceful unification and reversing the Three Communiques—in other words, shifting U.S. policy toward active promotion of Taiwan's independence from the mainland—would invite direct Chinese confrontation and produce little positive results in the Western Pacific or the Indian Ocean. However, strong and sustained U.S. commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act and working with partners to oppose unilateral changes to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait is critical. Chinese coercion of Taiwan through economic or military means would weaken U.S. and Japanese strategic influence in the Western Pacific and encourage the PLAN to focus increasing resources on the South China Sea and eventually the Indian Ocean. In contrast, rapprochement across the Taiwan Strait, if based on the security concerns and democratic values of the people of Taiwan, could in itself suggest positive changes in China's own political and strategic culture, boding well for broader Asian—and Indian Ocean—security.

A Strategic Problem: Not a Crisis

Despite all the recent attention, there is no immediate or looming crisis in the security of the Indian Ocean. There are important U.S. interests, however,

namely sustaining the critical commercial highway through the ocean, maintaining defense-in-depth to keep critical chokepoints open, and sanitizing the region against broader geostrategic competition and rivalry in Asia. The United States has the history, partners, and resources (absent defense cuts significantly larger than those currently proposed by the administration) to address these concerns and prevent regional crises from emerging. It will be important to preserve these interests not through new regional initiatives or commands, but by old-fashioned alliance management, maintaining naval power (especially in the Persian Gulf, the South China Sea, and the highway—supported from Diego Garcia and Australia), maintaining vibrant alliances in East Asia as well as clear commitments to Taiwan, and nurturing a strategic partnership with a rising India.

Despite all the attention, there is no immediate or looming crisis in the security of the Indian Ocean.

Notes

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