




## The Indian Ocean in Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Maritime Strategy and Geopolitical Imperatives

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b> Submitted 04.03.2025 Accepted 05.05.2025 Published 30.06.2025</p> <p><b>Volume No.</b> 12 <b>Issue No.</b> I <b>ISSN (Online)</b> 2414-8512 <b>ISSN (Print)</b> 2311-293X <b>DOI:</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Pakistan, Maritime Perspective, Foreign Policy, Indian Ocean, Geopolitical Perspective</p>	<p><i>Pakistan is an important coastal state because it shares a border with Afghanistan, China, and India. Pakistan's national security, maintaining a strong naval presence and coordinated marine patrols in the Indian Ocean is not a question of choice but a strategic imperative. Pakistan has inherited a maritime legacy. This paper primarily examines the implications of neglecting maritime economy for Pakistan and draws lessons that Pakistan can learn from other countries' maritime strategy. In this study, the historical context of Pakistan's maritime situation was analyzed. This paper further explored the reasons of why Pakistan kept putting maritime affairs on a back burner throughout its short history and how these matters have hindered Pakistan from achieving its desired objectives in this domain. While discussing maritime issues, the paper also incorporates a comprehensive analysis of its implications for Pakistan. This study concluded with the recommendations and lessons which can be learnt from maritime strategy of major powers of region. Pakistan's coastline is sparsely inhabited, with the exception of Karachi, while the coastal towns of Gwadar and Pasni lack potable water.</i></p> 

### Introduction

Pakistan has been at crossroads regarding the formulation, refinement, and eventual implementation of a focused foreign policy for some time. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is almost never mentioned in this era of intense competition. The Strait of Hormuz, which opens into the northern Arabian Sea, is very close to Pakistan (Brito, & Jaffe, 2005). Pakistan's approach to the Indian Ocean appears to be at a standstill, despite claims that the country's terrain is optimal. Due to the absence of a coherent policy for the Indian Ocean, Pakistan has a vital role for several energy-abundant nations in Central Asia and other coastal states bordering the Indian Ocean.

These terminals handle close to 95% of all commercial traffic in Pakistan (Islam, 2017). Despite being a major littoral state in the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR), Pakistan is not a member of either the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) or the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (Khalid, 2022). Pakistan is conspicuously absent from many regional summits and conferences. The main component that determines a nation's prosperity is its capacity to participate in unfettered trade with other nations. It does not matter how many natural resources a country has or how much potential it has to add value to those resources if it cannot trade. Considering that more than 85 percent of international trade takes place on the ocean, its significance is not difficult to comprehend. This helps to explain why safeguarding domestic maritime commerce while serving the enemy's was a top priority for both navies during the two World Wars. The sea is a shared resource for all nations, and maritime autonomy is a fundamental human right, unless there is a conflict between national interests and community requirements. All coastal states, including Pakistan, may take comfort from this prospective news (Asghar, 2020). All of

the main maritime powers, and particularly the countries that straddle the Persian Gulf, depend greatly on the stability of global maritime trade routes. Consequently, they cannot tolerate any form of disruption during a conflict in which both parties are heavily committed. When the maritime commerce of both parties is threatened by a conflict, belligerents may choose to avoid what has been termed *guerre de course* if they are confident that they will not gain a significant advantage. Especially if they discover their own enterprise could be affected (Ardemagni, 2018). The importance of deterrence becomes apparent at this juncture. However, this is merely a remark and should in no way be construed as an excuse to disregard security.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In spite of having a strategically significant coastline along the Arabian Sea and the uninterrupted access to the Indian Ocean, Pakistan has substantially undervalued the development of its maritime sector. Maritime affairs have lingered in obscurity in Pakistan's national security and foreign policy planning, dominated by territorial security concerns and geopolitical rivalries. This indifference has resulted in insufficient naval capabilities, weak commercial shipping infrastructure and maladministration of coastal resources, specifically in Gawadar and Pasni areas. While the regional and global powers amplify their maritime connections in the Indian Ocean, Pakistan faces the possibility of falling behind regarding economic cohesion, strategic deterrence, and eco-centric coastal development. The problem, therefore, resides in the lack of a rational and proactive maritime strategy that integrate with Pakistan's geopolitical realities and economic challenges.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To evaluate the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean in Pakistan's foreign policy and analyse the role of maritime affairs in national security and economic progress.
- To review the historical neglect of Pakistan's maritime sector and determine main responsibilities in various areas like ports, shipbuilding and the ocean economy.
- To benefit from lessons learned from regional and global maritime powers, in the formulation of more potent and proactive maritime strategy for Pakistan.

### **Literature Review**

Khan, Shi, & Ali (2024) analyze that Pakistan has failed to take advantage of its geostrategic maritime location, especially post-CPEC. They point out the Indian Ocean as a challenging territory where the regional powers specifically India and China are boosting their presence. The work connects maritime failure with missed economic and strategic opportunities. It highlights the strategic importance of Gawadar and critically analyze the neglect of long-term maritime vision in Pakistan's long-term policymaking sphere.

Farooq & Qazi (2023) highlight how Pakistan's maritime security aspects as have been historically neglected by strategic think tank, specifically due to continental preoccupations. They emphasize the need for establishing a coherent maritime doctrine. The research provides basis in determining strategic lapse, specially in naval development and maritime management.

Aslam, B., et al. (2023) explain that continuous maritime progress requires coherent governance, specially for shipping sector, to maintain a stable maritime. Whereas, maritime management in Pakistan is thought to be insufficient and inconsistent causing a serious challenge to sustainability, the National Maritime Policy (NMP) was commenced two decades ago in 2002 to provide and a comprehensive management frame work for long-term betterment is now outdated.

Aijaz, & Butt (2021) describe the economic domains of maritime neglect, especially how Pakistan's underdeveloped mercantile marine, ports and ocean economy restricted trade opportunities. They suggest institutional reforms and long-term investments.

Kaplan (2011) analyse the Indian ocean as a 21st-century geopolitical axis. Ma 21st century. Though not Pakistan specific, Kaplan established a broader strategic context in which Pakistan must analyse its maritime priorities.

Although the above endeavours have explored Pakistan's maritime challenges individually considering strategic, naval and economic perspectives, some analysts have systematically correlated these aspects into broader vision of foreign policy formulation and geopolitical warfare in the Indian Ocean. This article strives to fill that gap by aligning maritime delinquency with neglected strategic choices/possibilities and engraving practical lessons from other regional powers.

### **Significance of the study**

This study is important as it identifies a critically unexplored aspect of Pakis Pakistan's foreign policy ---the maritime sector. Regardless of its strategic position and entrance to important sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, Pakistan has historically concentrated more on land-based security concerns, marginalizing the pivotal potential of its coastal and maritime domains. As global interests move towards naval power,

economic connectivity and ocean economy development, it is vital for Pakistan to revamp its strategy. By considering maritime infrastructure, economic aspects and regional strategic warfare, this study provides timely comprehension of how maritime strategy can prove as a pillar for Pakistan's national growth and foreign policy goals.

### **Methodology of the study**

This article follows a qualitative research methodology in conformity with document and thematic analysis. It relies upon official policy documents, academic literature, governmental reports and strategic studies to examine the historical and current state of Pakistan's maritime sector. Thematic analysis is opted to determine recurring issues like the neglect of maritime planning and economic exploitation. A comparative lens is employed to analyse maritime approaches of regional and global powers and drawing policy-relevant lessons for Pakistan. The study is investigative and analytical, intended to develop practicable recommendations for integrating maritime affairs into Pakistan's broader strategic framework.

### **Maritime Perspective of Pakistan**

Pakistan enjoys a more advantageous strategic position than the vast majority of other nations due to its location adjacent to energy routes in the Indian Ocean. The nation is an important coastal state because it shares a border with Afghanistan, China, and India and has an Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf that comprise 290,000 square kilometers (Farooq, & Qazi, 2023). Approximately 15 million barrels per day of petroleum oil are transported from the Persian Gulf to the rest of the world via a route that travels close to the coast of Pakistan (Modarress, Ansari, & Thies, 2012). Due to the expediency of maritime travel to Afghanistan, China, and the Central Asian states, coupled with China's significant emphasis on this region, Pakistan opted to develop the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the principal project of China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. The events that took place in the Middle East, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror have given the United States a major geostrategic and geomilitary edge.

The same can be said about Pakistan's participation in the U.S.-led conflicts in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Pakistan's plan for the Indian Ocean remains classified, which is a poor decision (Alam, 2015). The term "Indian Ocean" is not used in any of its plans, including naval and military ones, nonetheless, the Maritimes.

### **CPEC & Maritime Security**

The provision of impregnable security on land and at sea is one of the most important criteria in determining whether or not the CPEC project will be successful. Despite the fact that the government has undertaken a significant number of measures, including the establishment of a new force to handle threats based on land, maritime security continues to be a neglected sector. Once CPEC is in its final stages of operation, Pakistan's marine interests will see a massive expansion. In addition, in the context of the new paradigm, traditional state-based threats, as well as those posed by violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and hybrid warfare, emerge as new phenomena. In no other region of the world this phenomenon is more obvious than in the Indian Ocean and its surrounding areas. A significant setback for the CPEC might result from any incident or assault on ships that are travelling to and from the port of Gwadar (Khan, & Chang, 2019). It would seem that the government has not yet paid the appropriate amount of attention to this facet for reasons that are difficult to fathom. The Pakistan Navy, as the ultimate guardian of the nation's wide and diversified marine interests, will have a significant role to play in light of the fact that our maritime interests, particularly the CPEC project, are being targeted by hybrid threats. It is possible that the success of CPEC will continue to be a pipe dream as long as there is no peace and stability in a region that is plagued by political instability (Iqbal, 2020). The ideology of Pakistan makes a benevolent reference to the marine environment and uses benevolent language about the Indian Ocean, but there is no indication that Pakistan has given any thought to its policies towards the region (PNWC, 2018). Even though there are several force-level maritime security and defence activities being undertaken by the Pakistan Navy to increase marine awareness and modify existing continental attitudes, the end goal still seems quite a way off. Understanding of Pakistani national policymaking is shared with Mahan, Corbett, and Pannikar, (Farid, 2020), and (in the absence of any strategic thinkers to credit), Pakistan, being India-centric in its plans, may engage in maritime strategic think-races with India and incorporate oceans in its grand strategic designs. The following are some of Pakistan's shared marine resources:

- *Mercantile Marine:* Because approximately 95% of its trade and 100% of its POL supplies are conveyed by sea, Pakistan could be considered a de facto island nation. It defies belief that a nation that places such a heavy emphasis on maritime commerce could get away with neglecting these vital aspects of the marine industry. Initially, Pakistan's commercial marine fleet consisted of only four ocean-going vessels, each of which had a very small capacity. This number ultimately rose to fourteen in 1950 and then skyrocketed to seventy-one by 1971. The government assumed control of

the shipping industry in 1974 and amalgamated nine private shipping companies to establish the Pakistan Shipping Corporation. The shipping industry was effectively nationalized by this action. Later in 1979, the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation and the Pakistan Shipping Corporation merged to form the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation (PNSC), with a combined fleet size of 74 ships. Since then, despite Pakistan's enormous economic growth potential, the country's transportation industry has declined. There are approximately ten ships in Pakistan's commercial fleet, five of which are bulk carriers, and the remaining five are oilers. Currently, Pakistan's annual trade is close to 100 million metric tons, of which the country's national carriers convey close to 5%, which is significantly less than the globally recommended 40%. As a direct result, the annual commodities bill is greater than \$4 billion, resulting in significant losses to the nation's foreign currency reserves (Iqbal, 2020).

- *Ports and Harbors:* The expansion of a nation's ports and harbors is crucial to the consolidation of its economy and the tremendous growth and development it enables. In comparison, India, which has a coastline spanning 7500 kilometres, has 14 main ports and 187 minor ports. Despite possessing a 1000-kilometre-long coastline, Pakistan has only three harbors. Karachi and Port Qasim are our most vital terminals for maritime trade. Currently, Karachi Port is responsible for 75% of all foreign cargo, whereas Port Qasim is responsible for the remaining freight. Karachi Port's operations commenced in 1987. In addition to its three designated container terminals, the port's private sector includes 27 general cargo berths. The Karachi Port Trust (KPT) has been responsible for its administration in accordance with the KPT Act since 1866. The Port Qasim Authority, also known as the PQA, was established on June 29, 1973, following the passage of a parliamentary act. Beginning in 1983, the port had attained its utmost operational capacity. It has a total of ten private terminals, but the Port of Qatar Authority is the only entity that handles liquefied natural gas (LNG). The Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) was established in 2002 under the GPA Ordinance and was incorporated in 2008. It has three compartments that can be used for a variety of purposes. The China Overseas Port Holding Company (PCHC) is responsible for operating Gwadar Port under the provisions of the Concession Agreement. Even though our terminals are situated in advantageous geostrategic positions, our hinterland connectivity is inadequate (Taseer & Babar, 2020).
- *Ship Building Industry:* Karachi Shipbuilding and Engineering Works, often known as KSEW, was a company that used to produce ships for the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation. However, owing to the negligence of several administrations over the last decade, the company is all but extinct. The Pakistan Navy has issued directives that have resulted in the KS&EW receiving help at the current time. However, in order to modernise its facilities, it will need backing from the government as well as massive investments from the private sector. The recent approval by the government of the establishment of a ship-repair facility in Gwadar is a step in the right direction, especially considering the fact that a considerable number of commercial boats go through the Gulf of Oman daily. These ships unquestionably need basic repairs on a regular basis and maybe even emergency docking on occasion. Such facilities are scarce both inside and outside of the Gulf; hence, if Pakistan were to establish ship repairs and maintenance facilities along contemporary lines, which would include experienced labour, covered bays, and synchro-lifts, the country would be able to readily fill the void that now exists (Obaidullah, 2021).
- *Ship Breaking Industry:* In the 1980s, Pakistan's shipbreaking business was ranked as the world's second-best in that sector. Gadani is home to approximately 125 ship-breaking plots and has the ability to manufacture over one million metric tons of steel in addition to other raw materials for local businesses. Unfortunately, as a result of modifications made to the tax system in the 1980s, this sector came to a complete and total end (Shazad, & Javaid, 2016). Nevertheless, in the recent past, there have been some attempts made for the sector's rebirth; but, this business is still not feasible owing to the use of manual processes, the lack of availability of new contemporary equipment, inadequate safety requirements, and tax regimes. Workers are forced to do their jobs in environments that are exceedingly harsh and dangerous, with very few facilities available; a high number of fatalities that occur as a result of accidents or exposure are not recorded (Taseer & Babar, 2020).
- *Mangroves Forests:* Pakistan is home to the world's sixth-largest mangrove forest. In addition to serving as a barrier against coastal erosion, they provide habitat for a diverse array of plant and animal species. It is projected that one hectare of mangrove might generate a yearly production of one hundred and twenty-five kilograms of prawns in addition to one hundred kilograms of fish. It is sad that mangroves have not been used to the full extent of their potential (Iqbal, 2020).



- *Blue Economy*: Pakistan is endowed with a 1000-kilometre littoral comprising the Exclusive Economic Zone (240,000 square kilometers) and the extended Continental Shelf (50,000 square kilometers). This augurs well for the development of a prosperous Blue Economy, but little has been done in this regard. The littoral region of Pakistan is comprised of the Indus and Makran basins. After the Bay of Bengal, the Indus basin is the second-largest delta system on the globe. The delta is approximately 600,000 hectares in size and is abundant in fish, hydrocarbons, and gas. It is also home to mangroves, which sustain a diverse biodiversity and are an essential link in the food chain of the North Arabian Sea's living resources. To attain the objective, comprehensive comprehension and commitment to the concept, as well as concerted efforts with international assistance, are required (Taseer & Babar, 2020).

### **Maritime Lessons from Regional and Global Powers**

Unlike Pakistan, China seems to be concentrating its marine efforts where they will do the best. The modernization of the PLA Navy is widely attributed to Adm. Liu Huaqing, who served as commander of the PLA Navy from 1982 until 1988. As Liu saw it, China's maritime goals materialized in a fleet that could safeguard maritime commerce and stake the nation's claim to great power status (Yung, & McNulty, 2015). What our leaders accomplished to improve the Navy's capabilities is public knowledge. Not much has changed, ironically, even today. China's maritime claims in the South China Sea have become more aggressive as her navy has become stronger. The safety of China's coastal provinces and trade routes in the South China Sea is a top priority for the country's maritime policy. The South China Sea is vital to China since it is where the great bulk of its petroleum and other imports arrive. Pakistan has to take note of this quickly. Beijing's oil imports are particularly vulnerable in the event of a military confrontation with New Delhi or Washington because of China's lack of a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean. Former Chinese leader Hu Jintao has previously mentioned the "Malacca Dilemma" and the need to protect China's economic and geopolitical interests in the area. It's clear from this that a strong navy is necessary to safeguard shipping lanes and other marine infrastructure. (Iqbal, 2020).

India has been expanding its connections to many Gulf states. India's success with its Look West Policy can be seen clearly in its marine cooperation with the United Arab Emirates. India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been working together on a number of maritime securities training exercises, including Gulf Star-1, which took place in 2018 (Agarwal, 2022). Strategic tensions are likely to rise in the Indian Ocean to the same extent as strategic viewpoints diverge. Any competitor's ability to achieve geostrategic goals may be hampered or complicated by this. As a result, China is gaining more clout as a result of its integrated and consistent strategy, in contrast to the US's erratic and meandering policy and India's considerably more futuristic perspective. China has an attractively comprehensive strategy. China's unified economic, political, and military endeavours in the South China Sea are being guided by this expansive partnership. Pakistan, as a key partner of China, may benefit politically and strategically from this situation; yet the country is still struggling to strike a good balance between its ties to China and the West, as well as its internal governance problems and economic instability. China is seen as having increased its collaborative or capacity-building engagements in the Indian Ocean over the last thirty years, which is a worrying trend in light of the tripolar rivalry between the United States, India, and China in the region. When taken along with China's economic connections with smaller nations, its expanding naval force and escalating marine presence in the Indian Ocean have prompted growing skepticism from the United States and India. It provides China with strategic and military space to maneuver outside of its local territory. As a response to the United States' grand plan, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) was established. The United States, Australia, Japan, and India all share strategic goals in opposition to China under the Quad. Everyone has a United States-centric perspective on events in Asia. Quad's goal since 2007 has been to challenge China in the region it considers its own, the Indo-Pacific. The Quad Alliance has resurfaced after lying dormant owing to internal rifts between the nations and a disharmonized strategy. In the middle of March 2021, the partner nations convened virtually for a Quad summit. Interestingly, it was Mr. Biden's first address since he was sworn in as president. China has been vocal in its belief that the United States-led QUAD should abandon "their Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice" and abandon their containment tactics. (Shahid, 2021). The original focus of the Quad was on maritime cooperation. The traditional and non-traditional threats define the tumultuous maritime security environment in which a naval force relies on to carry out its aforementioned missions. The Indian Ocean is no exception to the rule that unstable security circumstances and problems are present everywhere. Instead, the third-largest ocean after the Pacific and Atlantic has become more important in recent years. The Indian Ocean bears the brunt of 60% of all marine highway traffic because of its strategic location, linking the east and west of the world. Since the Middle East is a major supplier of energy to the rest of the world, the Arabian Sea is strategically important from a

geopolitical standpoint. Constant power struggles and rivalries for influence between the United States, China, and Iran have created a strategic cyclone in the area.

### **Conclusion**

All the geostrategic changes and events taking place in the Indian Ocean right now affect Pakistan. For Pakistan's national security, maintaining a strong naval presence and coordinated marine patrols in the Indian Ocean is not a question of choice but a strategic imperative. A fleet that is both formidable and interoperable is not a luxury but a necessity for every country. Pakistan has extensive maritime aims and interests since it is a legitimate maritime country. The development of China's Maritime Strategy is instructive in many ways. The marine sector is undeniably technology-driven and resource-heavy. But the issue is whether Pakistan has the financial wherewithal to continue ignoring the marine sector under various pretexts. Neglect of marine issues has also been exacerbated by a historical lack of industry and resources. Pakistan has already paid a high price for sea blindness, so this must be halted immediately. To make up for lost time, a concentrated effort is necessary to develop a comprehensive marine strategy. Almost every aspect of maritime power requires rapid attention, not only as a matter of defensive need but also because of the enormous economic rewards it provides. The new international order is incompatible with Pakistan's continental orientation. Pakistan's policymakers, decision-makers, and intellectuals have all come to recognize the sector's significance and pivot their attention to the sea. It's never easy to shift perspectives, but after CPEC, here's hoping people are now ready to do so. Now is the time to give it purpose and drive. A country's ability to successfully operate its ports and shipyards, rather than just construct them, is what really distinguishes it as a maritime superpower. Having a vision is easy; making that vision a reality is much harder.

Pakistan's national interests are at stake in the current power struggle in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, the nation's foreign and marine policies must specify its oceanic strategy. Pakistan should encourage maritime cooperation and aggressively engage regional actors via maritime diplomacy to counter both classic and non-traditional maritime challenges. It is essential to address national security threats in the maritime domain while enhancing Pakistan's position in the face of increasing maritime capabilities and competition in the Indian Ocean region. A re-evaluation of the significance of oceans in achieving national objectives and the necessity for a more robust navy and para-maritime forces is imperative. As focus has turned from geopolitics to geoeconomics and the security of marine commerce, especially from the perspective of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), calls for a larger, more potent navy as well as a stronger maritime presence for Pakistan in the region have surged. Smaller nation-states like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and others may gain significant benefits from various infrastructure, socioeconomic, and capacity-building initiatives when it comes to the larger nations' policy framework for vying for strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean. Instead of being used as a punching bag in a power struggle between larger nations, smaller governments could use strategic forethought to advance their own national interests and improve their citizens' material well-being.

### **Major Weaknesses in Maritime Policy**

- Pakistan's coastline is sparsely inhabited, with the exception of Karachi, while the coastal towns of Gwadar and Pasni lack potable water.
- Policy makers lack the required knowledge of maritime affairs.
- The absence of communication networks and essential infrastructure throughout the coastline region has intensified the issue.
- The lack of maritime regulation has impeded the growth of the maritime industry. In 2002, the first marine policy was issued.
- Pakistan has not grasped the advantages of its marine location or recognised the actual potential of its maritime strength as articulated by Admiral Mahan.

### **Recommendations for Maritime Policy**

Currently, we have numerous marine stakeholders to protect Pakistan's maritime interests. Moreover, the 18th Amendment has adversely impacted the administration of Pakistan's maritime sector, which engages with the international community, while provinces have been granted responsibilities prematurely. The following contours are suggested on the basis of all discussion:

- Modernization & Capacity Building of the Pakistan Navy enabling it to accomplish regional and extra-regional ambitions.
- Development of a framework to provide peace and for transporting ships in the Indian Ocean.
- Development of Mercantile Marine Fleet.
- Cooperation with the Gulf States to establish a task force that will target the financiers, organisers, and negotiators of the pirate business.

- To enhance focus on blue economy.
- To initiate natural resources exploration projects smooth and keep them intact to exploit the maritime potentials to their maximum.
- To gain the capability to protect national interest.

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