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**INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGIC RELEVANCE  
TO EUROPE: COLLABORATION,  
CHALLENGES AND COMPETITION**

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## Introduction

The Indian Ocean, the third largest body of water in the world, serves as a critical arena for global geopolitics and trade (M. Baruah et al., 2023). Its vast expanse links the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, making it a vital conduit for international commerce and energy supplies (M. Baruah et al., 2023). The region's geographic importance is amplified by its strategic position, bridging some of the world's most economically vibrant and politically significant areas (M. Baruah et al., 2023). As a result, the Indian Ocean has emerged as a key domain for economic competition, security collaboration and political rivalries.

At the heart of its strategic relevance lies its function as a global trade artery (M. Baruah et al., 2023). The Indian Ocean facilitates the movement of goods and resources, including energy supplies from the Persian Gulf to Europe and beyond (M. Baruah et al., 2023). The significance of this trade route is highlighted by the presence of critical chokepoints (Boston Consulting Group, 2024). These narrow waterways act as lifelines for maritime traffic, but they are also vulnerable to disruption, making their security a matter of paramount importance for global stability and prosperity (Boston Consulting Group, 2024). For European nations, maintaining the stability and openness of these trade routes is critical to their economic and energy security (Boston Consulting Group, 2024).

In recent years, the strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean have been shaped by the rising competition among global powers (M. Baruah et al., 2023). European countries, recognising the region's importance, have sought to deepen their engagement with India, a dominant regional player (European Parliament, 2024). Germany's participation in military exercises with Indian forces, along with similar collaborations by other European nations, highlights a growing commitment to securing shared interests in the region (Wagner et al., 2024). However, this cooperative dynamic faces a significant challenge from China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean (Lindley, 2022). Through investments in port infrastructure, the establishment of military bases, and its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has asserted its influence over key maritime corridors, raising concerns about its long-term impact on the balance of power in the region (Lindley, 2022).

Therefore, the Indian Ocean holds immense strategic relevance for Europe due to its role in trade, security and geopolitics. European nations have begun to recognise the necessity of building stronger ties with India to safeguard their interests in the region. At the same time, they must navigate the complexities posed by China's growing presence, which threatens to reshape the strategic landscape of this critical maritime domain. Understanding these dynamics is essential for Europe to maintain its influence and protect its priorities in the Indian Ocean.

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This article examines the Indian Ocean's strategic relevance to Europe by exploring its role in global trade, security, and geopolitical competition. First, it discusses the Indian Ocean's significance as a vital maritime trade corridor, emphasising the importance of key chokepoints and their impact on European economic and energy security. Next, it analyses the security challenges in the region, highlighting European efforts to strengthen ties with India as a strategic partner. The article then explores the growing influence of China, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative and military expansion, and the implications for European interests. Finally, it assesses the broader geopolitical landscape and the strategies Europe must adopt to maintain its influence and safeguard its priorities in this critical maritime domain.

## **1. The Indian Ocean's Geostrategic Importance for Europe**

The Indian Ocean occupies a central role in the global economy, and its significance for Europe cannot be overstated. This vast maritime expanse serves as the primary route for European trade with Asia and Africa, enabling the movement of goods, raw materials, and energy supplies (M. Baruah et al., 2023). European industries are heavily reliant on imports of oil and natural gas from the Persian Gulf, with approximately forty per cent of global oil supplies traversing the Indian Ocean (Jaishankar, 2016). The stability of this region, therefore, directly affects Europe's economic security and energy sustainability. Additionally, the Indian Ocean is a vital link in Europe's trade networks with emerging markets in Asia and Africa. Countries like India and China, which are among Europe's largest trading partners, depend on these shipping lanes for the export of manufactured goods. Similarly, the export of European technologies, automobiles and luxury goods to these regions also hinges on the uninterrupted flow of maritime trade (Faucon et al., 2025). Any disruptions in the Indian Ocean could destabilise these commercial ties, causing ripple effects across the European economy (Faucon et al., 2025).

Europe's reliance on the Indian Ocean extends beyond economics, as the region also plays a critical role in global security. Over the past two decades, piracy off the Somali coast has emerged as a major challenge, threatening shipping and endangering international trade (Djama, 2011). These operations demonstrate Europe's recognition of the region's security vulnerabilities and its commitment to addressing them (EU Naval Force, 2024). Furthermore, Europe's emphasis on ensuring freedom of navigation reflects its concern over maintaining access to key maritime routes (European Commission, 2023). The Indian Ocean not only facilitates economic activity but also serves as a stage for strategic rivalries (European Commission, 2023). Any instability in the region, whether caused by state actors, non-state actors, or natural disasters, has the potential to escalate into broader security threats (European Commission, 2023). For Europe, ensuring a stable and secure Indian Ocean is

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essential to maintaining its influence and protecting its global interests.

Three critical chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Malacca Strait, are of immense strategic importance to Europe (Boston Consulting Group, 2024). The Strait of Hormuz is the primary artery for oil and natural gas exports from the Persian Gulf (Dunn & Barden, 2023). Any disruption in this vital passage, whether due to geopolitical tensions or military conflicts, would severely impact Europe's energy security and drive up global energy prices (International Energy Agency, 2019). The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, situated between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and, by extension, to the Suez Canal (Lott, 2021). Given that the Suez Canal is a critical route for European trade with Asia, the security of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait is paramount (European Parliament, 2024a). The Malacca Strait, despite its geographical distance from Europe, is a lifeline for Asian economies like China, India and Japan, which, in turn, have strong trade and investment ties with Europe (Evers & Gerke, 2006). Instability in this area could create cascading effects on global trade patterns, impacting European markets indirectly (Dent, 2023). These chokepoints are not only vital for Europe's energy imports and trade but also represent potential flashpoints in international relations. Their strategic importance underscores the need for European involvement in safeguarding the Indian Ocean, both through direct engagement and partnerships with regional actors like India.

## **2. Europe-India Strategic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean**

India is a dominant regional power in the Indian Ocean, wielding significant influence through its geographic position, economic clout, and naval capabilities (M. Baruah et al., 2023). With a coastline of over 7,500 kilometres and access to strategically important waters, India has established itself as a key player in global affairs, boasting advanced capabilities, including aircraft carriers, submarines, and a robust maritime domain awareness framework (European Foundations for South Asian Studies, 2023). India also plays a vital role in promoting regional stability and countering threats such as piracy and terrorism. For example, combating piracy off the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Aden has directly contributed to safeguarding international shipping lanes (Marathe, 2024). Furthermore, India actively participates in multilateral frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), showcasing its commitment to a rule-based order in the region (Sakhuja, 2014). Its role as a stabilising force aligns closely with European priorities, making India a natural partner for Europe's strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean.

In the European context, Germany's increasing engagement in the Indian Ocean

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underscores its recognition of the region's strategic importance. A notable example is the joint naval exercises conducted by Germany and India (Wagner et al., 2024). These exercises are designed to improve interoperability between their naval forces, enabling seamless cooperation in areas such as search and rescue missions, anti-piracy operations, and humanitarian assistance (Singh, 2024). One of their primary objectives is to secure critical trade routes in the Indian Ocean, which are vital for both Germany's export-driven economy and Europe's broader economic interests (Singh, 2024). These collaborations also signal Germany's commitment to fostering a stable maritime environment, particularly in a region where rising geopolitical tensions threaten the freedom of navigation. Furthermore, such joining exercises serve as a demonstration of shared security goals and reinforce the importance of multilateral cooperation in addressing global challenges.

Beyond Germany, other European nations have also strengthened their strategic partnership with India in the Indian Ocean. France has been a particularly active player, leveraging its overseas territories in the Indian Ocean, such as Réunion and Mayotte, to maintain a permanent presence in the region (Cole & Jean-Pierre Cabestan, 2024). The French Navy regularly conducts joint patrols and exercises with the Indian Navy, focusing on anti-submarine warfare, maritime surveillance and counterterrorism operations (La France en Inde, 2023). France's deepening engagement reflects its recognition of India as a crucial partner in securing a free and open Indo-Pacific. In the same vein, the United Kingdom has also expanded its maritime security collaboration with India; the two nations conduct joint naval exercises, share intelligence, and collaborate on developing advanced maritime technologies (HM Government, 2014). The UK's renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific, as outlined in its 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,' places India at the centre of its strategy to counterbalance China's growing influence (UK Parliament, 2022). The European Union has formalised its strategic interest in the Indian Ocean through its Indo-Pacific Strategy. This comprehensive framework emphasises India as a key partner in fostering a rules-based international order. The EU seeks to deepen its cooperation with India in areas such as maritime security, climate resilience, and sustainable development (European Parliament, 2020). By engaging with India, the EU aims to ensure the stability of critical maritime routes while promoting shared values such as democracy and the rule of law.

Europe's strategic cooperation with India in the Indian Ocean reflects a recognition of India's pivotal role in the region. From joint exercises aimed at enhancing interoperability to broader partnerships addressing shared security and economic interests, Europe's engagement with India serves as a cornerstone of its strategy in the Indo-Pacific. These collaborations not only reinforce Europe's commitment to safeguarding its interests in the Indian Ocean but also strengthen the foundations of a rules-based, multipolar maritime

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order.

### **3. China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean**

China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean is reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape with profound implications for global security and economic dynamics. A cornerstone of China's strategy is the development of the String of Pearls, a network of ports and military bases strategically positioned along the Indian Ocean littoral (Pehrson, 2006). These installations, which extend from Southeast Asia to East Africa, provide China with both commercial access and military leverage in the region.

Key elements of this strategy include: the Djibouti Military Base, Gwadar Port and the Hambantota Port. The Djibouti Military base is China's first overseas military base (Tanchum, 2021). It is located at the mouth of the Red Sea and sits near critical European supply lines passing through the Suez Canal (Tanchum, 2021). This base enables China to project power, monitor maritime traffic, and safeguard its investments in Africa and the Middle East (Tanchum, 2021). However, its proximity to strategic choke points raises concerns about Beijing's long-term intentions (Tanchum, 2021). The Gwadar Port in Pakistan, situated near the Strait of Hormuz, is part of China's BRI (Vázquez, 2023). While ostensibly a commercial port, its dual-use potential for military purposes provides China with an advantage in securing energy supplies and monitoring naval movements in the region (Vázquez, 2023). Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, another BRI-linked project, has sparked global debate after Sri Lanka was forced to lease it to China for ninety-nine years due to debt repayment challenges (He, 2022). This has amplified fears of debt-trap diplomacy and raised alarms about China's ability to convert economic investments into strategic outposts (He, 2022). These moves provide China with the capacity to project power far beyond its immediate neighbourhood, challenging the existing balance of power in the Indian Ocean and raising concerns among regional and global stakeholders, including European nations.

Therefore, China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean poses significant challenges to Europe's strategic and economic interests. One of Europe's primary concerns is the potential restriction of freedom of navigation (European Parliament, 2017). The Indian Ocean serves as a vital trade artery for European imports and exports, particularly for energy supplies from the Persian Gulf (Sea Power Center, 2014). If China were to assert greater control over these waterways, it could disrupt the rule-based maritime order that underpins global trade. China's dominance in the region threatens to tilt the balance of power in its favour, diminishing the influence of traditional stakeholders like India, Europe and the United States. By gaining a foothold in key strategic locations, China has positioned itself to challenge existing alliances and reshape the regional order in ways that may not align with European



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values and interests (Sea Power Center, 2014). Through its investments in critical infrastructure, China has also gained significant economic leverage over smaller nations in the region (Pettus, 2023). This leverage could be exploited to gain political and strategic concessions, further undermining the stability and autonomy of the Indian Ocean littoral states, an outcome that would indirectly impact Europe's long-term interests in regional stability (Pettus, 2023).

India emerges as a natural counterbalance to China's growing dominance in the Indian Ocean (Pettus, 2023). As a regional power with historical ties to Europe, India's role in maintaining a stable and secure maritime environment is increasingly crucial (M. Baruah et al., 2023). India has steadily built its naval strength, with a focus on surveillance, anti-submarine warfare, and aircraft carrier deployment (Al Jazeera, 2025). Its naval presence in the Indian Ocean allows it to monitor Chinese activities and safeguard critical shipping lanes (Al Jazeera, 2025). India's efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness through initiatives like the Information Fusion Center-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) contribute to collective security (Information Fusion Center, 2021).

India's collaborations with the European nations, such as joint naval exercises, defence technology transfers and intelligence sharing, serve as a strategic hedge against China's growing influence. By aligning their interests with India, European countries can ensure the preservation of a rules-based order in the Indian Ocean while reinforcing India's ability to act as a stabilising force. India's active participation in regional and international forums provides a platform for Europe and other stakeholders to collectively address the challenges posed by China. Initiatives like the QUAD (India, Japan, the United States and Australia) and the IORA offer opportunities for Europe to work with India in promoting inclusive and sustainable development in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). China's strategic moves in the Indian Ocean have created a complex web of challenges and opportunities for Europe. While Beijing's investments and military bases pose a direct threat to European interests, India's growing role as a counterbalance offers a pathway for Europe to secure its priorities. By deepening its partnership with India and supporting multilateral efforts to uphold a rules-based maritime order, Europe can effectively navigate the evolving dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

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## Conclusion

The Indian Ocean is a critical artery for Europe's trade, energy security, and broader strategic interests. It connects Europe with the rapidly growing economies of Asia and the energy-rich Gulf states, making the stability of this region indispensable for European prosperity. Key maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb and the Malacca Strait are vital for the uninterrupted flow of goods and resources. However, growing geopolitical tensions, particularly due to China's expanding influence in the region, underscore the urgent need for proactive European engagement. China's String of Pearls strategy and its militarisation of key ports pose challenges to the rule-based maritime order and threaten to disrupt Europe's access to critical shipping lanes. These developments demand strategic foresight and a renewed commitment to safeguarding Europe's interests in the region.

The Indian Ocean will remain a focal point of global geopolitics in the coming decades, as competition for resources, trade dominance, and strategic influence intensifies. For Europe, this presents both challenges and opportunities. A failure to engage meaningfully in the region risks influence on powers with differing interests, while a well-coordinated and forward-looking approach could help shape a more stable and cooperative maritime order. By fostering partnerships with India and other like-minded nations, Europe can ensure its power remains significant in the region's affairs. This collaboration will be essential to safeguarding the principles of freedom of navigation, equitable development, and shared prosperity. With strategic foresight and collective action, Europe can play a pivotal role in ensuring peace, stability and progress for all stakeholders in the Indian Ocean.



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