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“Surrounding the Ocean: PRC Influence in the Indian Ocean”
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Chairwoman Kim, Ranking Member Bera, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, my sincere thanks for the honor of appearing today.

In my comments today, I wish to emphasize two overarching points. First, China's engagement throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is successfully expanding its influence. Second, despite China's deepening regional footprint, there remain opportunities for the U.S. to further national interests throughout the IOR and to reinforce established international rules and norms of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The U.S. can and should remain the partner of choice for much of the region, regardless of China's expanding influence, by invigorating the efforts of our regional partners.

Within the larger Indo-Pacific concept, the IOR draws far less attention from Washington than the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific's prioritization corresponds to our nation's history as a Pacific state, but there exist numerous challenges to U.S. national interests throughout the IOR that must not be overlooked. Chief among these challenges is the pace through which China has expanded its regional role to signal its arrival as a major power.

China's Footprint in the IOR

China's engagement throughout the IOR has been discussed for decades. From the "String of Pearls" to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is perceived as a state seeking influence throughout the IOR.¹ China is a critical trade partner for many of the IOR's littoral states, including many of the key security partners of the United States in the Arabian Peninsula.² The same is true for much of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Africa. China's economic engagement through its BRI is evolving, emphasizing the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, its maritime dimension, over the Silk Road Economic Belt, the overland trans-Asia route.³ The rise of China's economic connectivity in the IOR in turn propelled diplomatic efforts. The trend lines for Chinese presence throughout the IOR revealed why it was a logical choice for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to position first overseas military base in Djibouti.⁴

Today, China enjoys a perception benefit that comes at the expense of other non-regional actors, namely the United States. China's engagement throughout the IOR intensified without the entanglements of other major powers, meaning Beijing actively avoids interregional tensions, rivalries, and even conflicts. The only exceptions are where its relationships can serve a political windfall without substantial cost, exemplified by its recent facilitation of a diplomatic thaw

¹ McBride, James et al., "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/Chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

² Uppal, Rachna, "Gulf states, looking East, to reinforce economic ties with China as Xi visits Saudi," *Reuters*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-states-looking-east-reinforce-economic-ties-with-china-xi-visits-saudi-2022-12-06/>.

³ "Mapping the Belt and Road initiative: this is where we stand," *MERICs*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.merics.org/en/tracker/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand>.

⁴ Wuthnow, Joel. "The PLA Beyond Asia: China's Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region," *INSS, National Defense University*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.ndu.edu/News/Article-View/Article/2063404/the-pla-beyond-asia-chinas-growing-military-presence-in-the-red-sea-region/>.

between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁵ China's own opaque financial system served a public relations purpose as it continues to sell its system as a nimble and effective way for regional states to quickly finance needed domestic infrastructure projects. Altogether, China's IOR footprint overtly sold the country as a rising power, particularly in comparison to "old" Western powers.

Economic progress throughout the IOR and the political currency that followed is slowly, though steadily, translating into the security sphere. China's base in Djibouti was negotiated following its experiences in UN peacekeeping operations and counterpiracy operations near the Horn of Africa. The base was to be a dual-use naval facility and staging ground for UN-related missions for the PLA, but ended up being a much larger and multifaceted base. Put differently, the same progressive steps that signaled China's regional intent in the Western Pacific decades ago is being replicated, to a degree, in parts of the IOR.⁶ Exercises in the IOR, specifically with Russia and Iran, have taken place. Investments in port development throughout South Asia, with particular emphasis on the Port of Gwadar in Pakistan, are all indications of how deep China's economic relations in the region have become and how the security concerns of Beijing have followed.⁷

The Region

The states of IOR are overtly aware of the growing interest in their region and the region's geostrategic importance. The waters of the Indian Ocean are bounded both east and west by critical chokepoints and its sea lanes are vital to the health of the global economy. The natural resource wealth of the IOR fuels the economies of China and other western Pacific nations. The IOR is also beset by a lack of regional cohesion that occasionally creates scenarios in which non-regional actors appear as better collaborative partners than immediate neighbors. Ongoing conflicts in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, along with border disputes and interregional rivalries, further contribute to mistrust.

Yet, the IOR must not be perceived as a region where China's economic and diplomatic overtures are simply taken at face value. The region retains suspicion of all major non-regional actors. The lack of interregional trust is being combatted by a continued support of multilateralism and a developing commitment to regional adaptation. Sub-regional organizations like the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), among others, are each an example of how the region is seeking ways to overcome regional political separation. Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), initiated with regional partners by the U.S., is one of the most successful maritime security cooperation efforts in the world and is a constant asset for the region to enhance its naval and maritime law enforcement capacity.⁸

⁵ Fantappie, Maria and Vali Nasr, "A New Order in the Middle East? Iran and Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement Could Transform the Region," *Foreign Affairs*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations>.

⁶ Baruah, Darshana, "Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean," *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, May 12, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/12/maritime-competition-in-indian-ocean-pub-87093>.

⁷ Grare, Frederic, "Corridor to nowhere: The Gwadar protests and the Pakistan-China relationship," *ECFR*, January 5, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/corridor-to-nowhere-the-gwadar-protests-and-the-pakistan-china-relationship/>.

⁸ "Combined Maritime Forces," *CMF*, 2023, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>.

China's regional footprint is largely separate from regional unilateral and multilateral efforts. Engagement to the region by the Chinese state predominately took the form of bilateralism and focused on its ability to help modernize and expand regional state development. The speed and scale of development funding from China was difficult for many regional states to pass up and the results of their economic ties to China vary substantial. China's economic engagement has not merely resulted in "debt traps", though its current delay in restructuring existing loans to countries in default warrants more questions.⁹ Regional states view China as everything from a partner of convenience to its preferred non-regional partner. In response to critiques of IOR regional economic and political ties to China, a common response is that China was the only state that was willing to provide the requests of the region.

U.S. Interests and Opportunities

The IOR, from the perspective of the U.S., covers the area of responsibility of three combatant commands within the Department of Defense and three bureaus of the Department of State. The U.S. sustains a constant diplomatic presence throughout the region and in the northwest reaches of the IOR, U.S. engagement has been constant and sizeable. Yet, the U.S. does not see the IOR as a region in the same way as it does the Pacific. Inconsistent is one way that the IOR describes U.S. regional engagement. The lack of a comprehensive definition of the IOR by the U.S. does impede the ability of various U.S. government offices responsible for IOR subregions to seamlessly communicate. It is why others have logically called for Congress to facilitate a coordination office that looks beyond U.S. administrative seams.¹⁰

U.S. regional presence is already changed and will change further in the years to come. The Indo-Pacific concept of the U.S. includes a sizeable portion of the eastern IOR and U.S. commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific means invigorating partnerships with regional states committed to the sustainment of established rules and norms.¹¹ India emerges as a prime example. Consistent diplomacy has expanded the scope and scale of bilateral relations, including consistent military exercises, defense institution building efforts, and economic investment. India is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) that seeks to expand Indo-Pacific cooperation and development.¹²

Beyond India, relationships among ASEAN, the Middle East, and East Africa are also the focus of diplomatic investment. The established U.S. partnerships within the Arabian Peninsula remain focused on existing security challenges but are also expanding attention towards emerging challenges and new forms of regional architecture. NAVCENT, USCENTCOM's

⁹ Savage, Rachel and Chris Mfula, "Zambia 'punished' as debt rework not finished, says finance minister," *Reuters*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/zambia-punished-debt-rework-not-finished-says-finance-minister-2023-04-06/>

¹⁰ Baruah, Darshana, "Maritime Competition in the Indian Ocean," *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, May 12, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/12/maritime-competition-in-indian-ocean-pub-87093>.

¹¹ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," *The White House*, February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

¹² "Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi," *U.S. Department of State*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-quad-ministerial-meeting-in-new-delhi/>.

naval component, initiated Task Force 59 that stood up innovative ways to expand maritime domain awareness in the waters of the Middle East using unmanned systems, public-private partnerships, and regional collaborations.¹³ Task Force 59 is just one of several such task forces intended to expand domain awareness for security forces in the region. Such efforts reflect not only the changing security concerns of the region, but the ways in which the U.S. is adapting to regional signals.

Throughout the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and other U.S. government sections, there is an effort to show up for the IOR. One way in which the region highlighted the lack of consistency by the U.S. was through the absence of senior U.S. officials in major regional and subregional conferences and gatherings. The U.S. is no longer absent. This year's Raisina Dialogue, a prominent international gathering hosted annually in Delhi, was attended by both Secretary Blinken and INDOPACOM Commander, Admiral Aquilino.¹⁴

Comprehensively, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the key region for U.S. foreign policy is translating into a greater willingness to listen to the region to inform our own policy development. U.S. national interests in the IOR can be listed as ensuring regional freedom of navigation and overflight, upholding established international rules and norms, expanding commerce and the protection of our environment, and securing the region, with allies and partners, from threat. Essential to upholding national interests in the IOR are the further development of U.S. partnerships.

Recommendations

The U.S. must recognize the importance of the IOR in total, not in part. The IOR matters for U.S. national interests and while it may not have the same degree of priority as that of the Pacific, there is much the U.S. can do. Recommendations for the subcommittee to consider are the following:

Promote U.S. foreign policy efforts and goals throughout the region. Strategic communications throughout the IOR are extremely important, particularly given the diversity of efforts through which the U.S. enacts its foreign policy. It remains too common that portions of the IOR remain confused about U.S. interests in the region or perceive U.S. efforts through incomplete or false narratives. The U.S. must both clearly and passionately discuss its record in the region, reveal the depth of its engagement, and highlight the scale of its regional partnerships. Part of the reason for China's rise in prominence is that China loudly shares the depth of its regional partnerships. Comparatively, U.S. economic engagement in some of the IOR does not match China's, but comprehensively, the U.S. enjoys far deeper and sustained diplomatic, security, and economic engagement throughout the IOR.

Recognize and respond to regional requests for security assistance. U.S. security partnerships remain the preference for many regional states, but today's requests for security cooperation are

¹³ Lariosa, Aaron-Matthew, "US Navy Highlights TF 59 Contributions To Fleet's Unmanned Vision," *Naval News*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.navalnews.com/event-news/sna-2023/2023/01/us-navy-highlights-tf-59-contributions-to-fleets-unmanned-vision/>

¹⁴ "Raisina Dialogue," *Observer Research Foundation*, March 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/raisina-dialogue/>

not in the same mold as in the past. Increasingly, regional states request U.S. assistance for capability enhancement and not capacity building. This difference is one where skill advancement is preferred over equipment or supplies. Regional requests for defense institution building, strategic coursework, and technical training are on the rise. Such requests are not only more viable financially for the U.S., but also requests assistance in areas where the U.S. enjoys immense advantages over competing providers. Congress should help support and propel this trend.

Commit to becoming connective tissue for the IOR. The IOR has a myriad of regional institutions, subregional organizations, and political forums designed to help build trust within the region and to counter transregional threats. The U.S. is already working to strengthen those efforts in consult with our regional partners, but we can and should do more to help tie the region together. Whether through innovation, such as NAVCENT's Task Force 59, or information sharing mechanisms, such as public-private technological efforts in the U.S. intended as a public good for regional partners, the U.S. can work with the region in practical ways. Such engagement is based upon regional need, in alignment with U.S. interests, and serves to exemplify the benefits of partnership with the U.S. The IOR desires engagement with the U.S. and we can help fuel positive trends that are emerging throughout the region.¹⁵

¹⁵ Payne, Jeffrey, "Jumpstarting an Indian Ocean Region Approach for the United States," *The Diplomat*, December 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/jumpstarting-an-indian-ocean-region-approach-for-the-united-states/>