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The People's Liberation Army and Operational Access in the Indian Ocean Region: Geographic Constraints and Lessons from the Cold War

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Introduction

This chapter examines challenges faced by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in obtaining operational access to the Indian Ocean region (IOR). The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section reviews constraints on and challenges to extraregional powers' operational access to the IOR as a result of its geography. The second section provides a case study of the Soviet military presence in the IOR during the Cold War, focusing on how this presence was molded by Soviet strategic imperatives and geographic constraints. The third section examines the challenges the People's Liberation Army is facing in gaining operational access to the region. The author would like to thank Olivia Truesdale for her assistance in conducting research for this chapter.

This chapter does not examine the PLA's operational access to the IOR by attempting to discern China's current intentions. Instead, it focuses on how China's strategic imperatives may drive the army's future presence, bearing in mind the geographic constraints particular to the region and the Soviet experience during the Cold War. The chapter considers operational access in the land, sea, and air domains but not the space or cyber domains.

The chapter arrives at the following key conclusions.

- The People's Liberation Army faces major geographic challenges in gaining operational access to the IOR for naval, air, and land forces.
- The imperative to secure local bases and assured access with local partners is an important driver in China's political, economic, and security relationships in the region.
- Mitigation strategies exist in case of unavailability of onshore naval logistical support.
- Amphibious and noncombatant vessels will be valuable to the People's Liberation Army in extending regional influence.

- Geographic constraints, including overflight restrictions and access to local airfields for basing and staging, hamper the PLA's air-power access.
- The size and composition of the People's Liberation Army's future presence in the IOR are not ordained. The size and composition will ultimately be a function, inter alia, of China's interests in the region.

Geographic Constraints on Military Operational Access to the IOR

The physical geography of the Indian Ocean has a significant effect on the strategic dynamics of the region, including operational access by extraregional military forces.[1] The ocean is largely enclosed on three sides. Other bodies of water offer few maritime entry points, and the ocean features vast stretches of water that contain few islands. The Great Himalaya mountain range, which spreads along the southern rim of the Eurasian continent, also cuts off much of the Eurasian hinterland from easy access to the sea.

The land domain contains an unusual scarcity of overland pathways between the Eurasian hinterland and the Indian Ocean littoral. Indeed, until well into the twentieth century, no major transport routes—roads, railways, or rivers—connected the ocean with the continental hinterland. This disconnect has long made gaining physical access to the Indian Ocean difficult for major, nonlittoral powers, such as China and Russia. Historically, this disconnect has led to these powers being economically and politically oriented away from the Indian Ocean and has severely limited their presence and influence in the region. Indeed, the physical limitations on access to the Indian Ocean by land have meant no continental Eurasian power has ever militarily dominated the IOR.

In the maritime domain, the semi-enclosed geography of the Indian Ocean creates a premium for powers that control the choke points of entry into the ocean from the Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, and Mediterranean Sea. A power that can control access to the limited number of deepwater ports in the IOR can also deny essential logistical support to rival maritime powers.

These considerations have molded naval strategy in the Indian Ocean for around 500 years. The Portuguese adventurer and imperialist Afonso de Albuquerque first used a maritime choke-point strategy in the fifteenth century to transform the Indian Ocean into a mare clausum (or closed sea) over which Portugal had exclusive jurisdiction. When Britain gained control of the Indian Ocean in the early nineteenth century, the country followed a similar strategy, seizing the key oceanic choke points at the Strait of Malacca and South Africa and on the Red Sea. Britain's control of most of the Indian Ocean littoral prevented rivals from establishing naval bases in the region, ensuring the Indian Ocean could be controlled by the country essentially as an enclosed maritime space. The United States, which has been the predominant power in the Indian Ocean since the late 1970s, has also sought to exclude its competitors.

1. David Brewster, "Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China's New Pathways in the Indian Ocean," *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 1–23.

Analogous constraints exist in the air domain. The IOR is a huge oceanic space with few islands, making access to local airfields for staging and logistical support essential. The noncontiguity of China with the Indian Ocean also means Chinese military aircraft can access international airspace in the IOR from home territory only by transiting sovereign airspace, which requires host-country consent. ("Sovereign airspace" corresponds to the airspace above sovereign territory, including territorial waters. International airspace is not under the control of any state. The 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation facilitates overflight of sovereign airspace by commercial [but not military] aircraft, although China and Russia are not parties to the convention.) Overflights of sovereign territory are subject to tracking and interdiction, and the refusal of countries to grant overflight rights can create significant operational problems. For example, in 1986, France and Spain refused overflight rights to the United States for air strikes on Libya, meaning US strike aircraft based in Britain could only fly over international waters from air bases in Britain, including through the Strait of Gibraltar.[2] For these reasons, the contest for airpower access to the IOR in many ways parallels contests for access to naval ports.

Soviet Military Operational Access to the IOR during the Cold War

This section provides a case study of the Soviet Union's operational access to the IOR during the Cold War. The experience of the Soviet Union as a major Eurasian continental power without direct access to the Indian Ocean provides interesting similarities to the constraints faced by China today.

Soviet Strategic Imperatives in the Indian Ocean

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union generally regarded the Indian Ocean as a theater of secondary importance in comparison to Europe and the western Pacific. Up until the late 1960s, the IOR was dominated by Britain through its administration of colonial territories and the presence of the Royal Navy. Only following decolonization and the withdrawal of most British military assets from east of Suez, announced in early 1968, did the Soviet Union demonstrate any substantive military interest in the region. In the following years, the Soviet Union developed a large naval presence in the Indian Ocean in competition with the United States.

Soviet strategic imperatives in the IOR differed considerably from those of the United States throughout the Cold War. The strategic imperatives evolved somewhat over time, but they included:

- restricting or preventing the United States from using the Indian Ocean as a base for conducting nuclear strikes against Soviet territory;
- ensuring the security of sea routes through the Indian Ocean, including the year-round sea route connecting the Soviet ports in Europe with East Asia;

2. Robert E. Harkavy, *Bases Abroad: The Global Foreign Military Presence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989), 95.

- posing a limited threat to US energy supplies and the movement of US forces into the region;
- providing seaborne support for Soviet activities in space, including tracking and seaborne recovery;
- extending Soviet political influence among the newly independent Indian Ocean states and support for national liberation movements;
- supporting the Soviet fishing fleet against seizure or harassment; and
- gaining sailing experience in distant waters under different climatic conditions.[3]

Strategic competition between the Soviet Union and the United States in the IOR waxed and waned throughout the 1970s. The fall of the shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 heightened competition between the two superpowers. But Soviet strategic imperatives remained limited, and the missions of the Soviet fleet were quite different from those of the US Navy. Overall, the United States and its allies were largely successful in containing the Soviet military's presence and role in the IOR.

Development of the Soviet Military Presence in the IOR

This section discusses the development of the Soviet military presence in the IOR in the maritime, air, and land domains.

Constraints on Soviet Naval Access

The Soviet Navy was subject to significant geographic constraints on operational access to the IOR, including extreme distances from home territory or bases under full Soviet operational control; the need to access the region through narrow choke points, which facilitated tracking and interdiction by the United States and its allies; and imperatives to develop local logistical support facilities from often politically unreliable partners.

Although it was a major Eurasian power, the Soviet Union had no direct access to the Indian Ocean and few reliable partners in the region. As a result, the Soviet Navy was forced to deploy to the Indian Ocean principally from ports on the Soviet Union's Pacific coast (Vladivostok and Avacha Bay) and from Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam (starting in 1979). Access from the Pacific Ocean involved transiting the narrow straits through the Indonesian Archipelago, where vessels were subject to interdiction and tracking. (Starting in 1981, Australia assumed primary responsibility for tracking Soviet vessels transiting the Strait of Malacca.) Geography placed even greater constraints on access from Soviet-controlled ports in the European theater, which involved transiting the Suez Canal (which was closed between 1967 and 1976) or undertaking the lengthy journey around Africa.

3. A. Ladozhsky, "The U.S.S.R.'s Efforts to Turn the Indian Ocean into a Zone of Peace," *International Affairs* 7 (1981): 44; and Thomas McClintock Price, "Soviet-Indian Relations and the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace" (master's thesis, US Naval Postgraduate School, 1981).

These constraints had a significant impact on the size and composition of the Soviet fleet deployed to the Indian Ocean. The three-week transit time from Vladivostok to the Gulf of Aden meant keeping one combatant vessel on station (with an average deployment of five months) and required ships to spend approximately four months per year in transit for each ship-year of deployment. Long transits from home ports also impeded the easy deployment of small patrol ships and frigates to the Indian Ocean.[4]

The distances from home ports created significant logistical issues. More than 50 percent of Soviet vessels deployed to the Indian Ocean were support and other auxiliary vessels. Logistical considerations may have constrained operations in the theater, meaning Soviet ships spent relatively long periods at anchor.[5]

These challenges created strong imperatives to obtain local bases or assured access to support facilities that could provide home basing, logistical support, and support in communications, electronic intelligence collection, and aerial reconnaissance. From the mid- to late 1970s, the Soviet Navy was successful in developing several naval support facilities in or near the Horn of Africa: at Aden, South Yemen (now Yemen); at Berbera, Somalia; and at Massawa, Ethiopia (now Eritrea). Where onshore support was not available, the Soviets relied on support vessels anchored in floating bases in international waters, including near the island of Socotra in Yemen, near the Comoro Islands, west of Diego Garcia, and near Mauritius.

This quest for access was pursued opportunistically and largely secured through offering military assistance to host governments, rather than relying upon ideological alignments. The ad hoc nature of the arrangements meant the Soviets had to rely on politically unstable governments; as a result, the Soviets' access rights were far from guaranteed. The Soviet Navy was evicted from Somalia in 1977, and Soviet facilities in neighboring Ethiopia came under attack from local insurgents on several occasions. Concerns about the reliability of local partners often led the Soviets to use portable equipment, such as floating piers, storage tanks for water or fuel, and floating dry docks that could be moved elsewhere if required.[6]

Moscow was not successful in establishing Soviet-controlled naval support facilities elsewhere in the IOR, including in the southwestern, central, and eastern Indian Ocean. Despite hopes the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation would lead to bases in India, the Soviet Navy only gained limited access to Indian ports. Beyond the Horn of Africa area (and Iraq in the Persian Gulf), the Soviet Navy was forced to rely on limited logistical support, made available on a commercial basis in Singapore, Seychelles, India, and elsewhere. Although some Western analysts argued the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was motivated by ambitions to build a naval port at Gwadar, Pakistan, no evidence supports this contention.

4. Philip S. Gillette and Willard C. Frank, eds., *The Sources of Soviet Naval Conduct* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1990), 257.

5. CIA, *DDCI Briefing: Soviet Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean* (Langley, VA: CIA, May 7, 1975).

6. Gillette and Frank, *Soviet Naval Conduct*, 267.

Development of the Soviet Naval Presence in the IOR

Prior to 1968, the Soviet military had no substantive military presence in the IOR. Until the 1960s, Britain was the predominant power in the region, administering most of the territories there, with the Royal Navy dominating the seas. Britain's 1968 announcement of the withdrawal of most of its military forces from east of Suez, however, created a power vacuum the Soviet Union sought to fill. Within several months, the Soviet Navy made its first substantive foray into the IOR with a flotilla of four ships deployed from Vladivostok.

Over the following decades, the Soviet naval presence generally grew in response to certain events. Naval activity increased between 1972–75 because of the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Arab and Israeli forces and the subsequent oil embargo imposed by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. Next, the Soviet presence declined for several years, and then it rose again beginning in 1979 in response to simultaneous crises in Iran and Afghanistan. The number of days spent by Soviet naval ships in the Indian Ocean in 1968, 1974, and 1980 are presented in table 4-1.[7]

Year	Total Ship Days	Average Ships per Day
1968	1,200	3
1974	10,500	29
1980	11,800	32

Table 4-1. Number of days spent by Soviet naval ships in the Indian Ocean

For much of the 1970s, the total number of Soviet ship-days in the Indian Ocean (more specifically, the number of ships multiplied by their length of presence) exceeded that of the US Navy, providing the Soviet Navy with local and temporary naval superiority, particularly in the lower Red Sea area. The large presence of Soviet ships may have also reinforced Soviet political influence in the Horn of Africa and, possibly, with important regional players, such as India and Saudi Arabia. Arguably, Saudi Arabia's "vacillating" regional policy in the late 1970s was influenced by Soviet naval strength in its vicinity.[8] The Soviet Navy, however, did not achieve meaningful and lasting naval superiority across the region. The naval balance in favor of the Soviet Union was quickly reversed in times of crisis, such as the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the 1978–79 Iranian Revolution, when US naval forces were surged into the Indian Ocean at short notice.[9]

The composition of the Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean also differed considerably from that of the US fleet, which was often based around carrier strike groups. The Soviets' standard Indian Ocean squadron of around 20 to 22 ships included one cruiser, two destroyers, one or fewer cruise missile submarines, one attack submarine, two frigates, one minesweeper, two amphibious

7. Bruce W. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea: Soviet Naval Operations on the High Seas, 1956–1980* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), 148.

8. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 157.

9. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 150.

ships, one or fewer intelligence collectors, 10 auxiliary ships, and one hydrographic research ship. Often, the Soviet fleet was even larger. In March 1978, for instance, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron consisted of 32 ships: two destroyers, two submarines, four frigates, four landing ships (tank), one minesweeper, and 19 auxiliaries (tenders, barracks ships, oilers, and so forth).[10] The Soviet fleet generally lacked organic airpower, and the large number of auxiliary vessels indicates the logistical difficulties they faced. The high number of surface vessels and small number of submarines might also suggest the mission was largely a political rather than combat-oriented one.[11]

Development of Soviet Airpower in the IOR

The Soviet air presence in the IOR developed in conjunction with the naval presence, with several years' lag. Operational access was also geographically constrained. The Soviet Union's lack of geographic contiguity with the Indian Ocean meant flight distances into the region were often long, and aircraft operating from Soviet territory had to overfly sovereign airspace to reach international airspace.

The refusal of US allies on the southern Asian littoral, such as Iran and Pakistan, to grant overflight rights and the difficulties Moscow faced in obtaining overflight rights from other countries constrained air access from Soviet territory. During the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, the Soviet Air Forces were forced to stage their arms airlift to India via Egypt to avoid overflight of Pakistani or Chinese airspace.[12] Even Soviet strategic partners such as India were leery of granting overflight or staging rights to Soviet military aircraft, although the former granted such rights to the latter on occasion when doing so would benefit the former—for example, the Soviet airlift of military equipment to Vietnam during its 1979 war with China.

For many years—particularly, in the early years of the Cold War—the Soviets were denied overflight rights over much of Africa, severely constraining air access from the European theater. In the 1950s, Soviet aircraft could, in theory, only reach the Persian Gulf by flying from bases in Murmansk in the Arctic Circle over the Atlantic Ocean and then circumnavigating the entire African continent, which would have required a nonstop flight of some 13,000 nautical miles.[13] Although these constraints were later loosened somewhat, in a Soviet airlift to Angola in 1975, aircraft were still forced to make lengthy diversions through western African airspace.[14]

As with the naval dimension, these constraints created a premium for access to local air bases for basing, staging, and logistical support. By the late 1970s, Moscow was able to breach the air containment ring in the IOR by gaining air bases and access to air facilities or staging rights in and around the Horn of Africa, including at Aden, South Yemen (beginning in 1974);

10. Michael McDevitt, *Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean: The Past as Prologue?* (Arlington, VA: CNA, March 2018), 10.

11. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea*, 148.

12. Gillette and Frank, *Soviet Naval Conduct*, 252.

13. Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, *Discriminate Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1988), 24.

14. Harkavy, *Bases Abroad*, 98.

Berbera, Somalia (1974–77); anAsmara, Ethiopia (now Eritrea) (1977–84); and access to secondary staging points in Mozambique (beginning in 1977).[15]

The composition of Soviet airpower in the IOR largely involved long-range transport and maritime surveillance and strike aircraft based in the Soviet Union, with shorter-range Ilyushin Il-38 maritime patrol aircraft based in or near the Horn of Africa. This composition allowed the Soviet reconnaissance aircraft to cover much of the northwestern Indian Ocean regularly, including to the Suez Canal and Strait of Hormuz. Tupolev Tu-95 "Bears" flying from the Soviet Union and staging throughout the Horn of Africa could have covered a much broader area as well. In the 1980s, long-distance maritime surveillance and strike aircraft were also based in Afghanistan.

One of the biggest Soviet air operations in the IOR was an emergency airlift of arms to Ethiopia in 1977–78 that involved 225 transport aircraft in a perceived demonstration of Soviet airlift capabilities. According to public reports, Soviet aircraft based in Ukraine and Hungary were forced to overfly several countries (Yugoslavia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, and Libya) without consent.[16]

Outside of the Horn of Africa, Soviet access to air bases or staging points elsewhere in the IOR was very limited. Attempts by Moscow to gain airfield access in Seychelles were not successful, nor were attempts to lease the old British air base at Gan in the Maldives.[17] The Soviets were forced to rely largely on Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam (starting in 1979) for access to Southeast Asia and the eastern Indian Ocean. Soviet attempts to use the Non-Aligned Movement in a counterstrategy to deny the United States access to air and other military bases in Egypt, Kenya, Oman, and Somalia were also unsuccessful.[18]

Soviet Land Power in the IOR

With one major exception, the Soviet ground forces generally played a less significant role in the region compared to Soviet naval and air forces. Because of the noncontiguity of Soviet territory with the Indian Ocean, the army also generally relied on air and naval forces for access to the region. The Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean commonly included one (and up to four) amphibious vessels with embarked naval infantry, and the fleet principally pursued Soviet political objectives. For instance, for several years, a Soviet amphibious ship with 250 troops (reportedly dubbed the "baby-sitter") was regularly anchored in Seychelles to discourage coups against the Soviet-friendly regime.[19]

15. CIA, *DDCI Briefing*, 14; and Louis Andolino and Louis Eltscher, *Soviet Naval Military and Air Power in the Third World*, Report no. N00124-83RC-02893 (Newport, RI: Center for Naval Warfare Studies, March 1984), 24.

16. John B. Hattendorf, ed., *Naval Policy and Strategy in the Mediterranean: Past, Present and Future* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Drew Middleton, "Airlift to Ethiopia Seen as Soviet Test," *New York Times*, January 8, 1978.

17. Roy Allison, *The Soviet Union and the Strategy of Non-Alignment in the Third World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 209; and Peter Gill, "Russia Fails in Bid for Ex-RAF Base," *Daily Telegraph*, October 28, 1977.

18. Allison, *Strategy of Non-Alignment*, 210.

19. McDevitt, *Great Power Competition*, 16.

At different times throughout the 1970s and 80s, Soviet military advisers were deployed to IOR littoral states, such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, and South Yemen, and nearby countries, such as Angola, Egypt, and Iraq. The largest Soviet ground forces deployment to an Indian Ocean littoral state occurred in 1977–78, when 1,500 Soviet advisers and 16,000 Cuban combat troops were deployed to Ethiopia through a major airlift and sealift to assist the country in its war with Somalia.

The largest Soviet ground forces deployment in the broader IOR was to Afghanistan, where 600,000 Soviet military personnel served between 1979 and 1989. (Afghanistan is generally understood to form part of the broader IOR, although Afghan territory lies at least 480 kilometers from the sea.) Afghanistan's contiguity with Soviet territory provided both the imperative for Soviet intervention and the means by which such a large military presence could be sustained.

Constraints on China's Access to the Indian Ocean and China's Future Military Presence

This section discusses the PLA's current and future operational access to the IOR, considering geographic constraints and China's strategic imperatives.

China's Strategic Imperatives and Its Future Military Presence

An overall evaluation of Chinese strategic thinking about the IOR is generally beyond the scope of this paper. But, notably, for more than a decade, the PLA Navy's (PLAN's) strategic plans have been evolving toward a two-ocean strategy that would include a permanent naval presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Indeed, You Ji argues the Indian Ocean "will gradually become a linchpin for China's new global naval reach."[20] More recently, the IOR has been a key focus of China's Belt and Road Initiative, including as the maritime space connecting China with its sources of energy in the Middle East and Africa and China's transport route to Europe and other important markets. The Belt and Road Initiative is now the principal driver behind China's growing economic and military presence in the region.[21]

Despite its growing importance, for China, the IOR is clearly a region of secondary importance compared with the western Pacific. Beijing nevertheless has considerable and growing strategic equities in the region that drive several strategic imperatives or missions, including:

- conducting noncombat activities that focus on protecting Chinese citizens and investments;
- gaining experience in expeditionary operations;

20. You Ji, "The Indian Ocean: A Grand Sino-Indian Game of 'Go,'" in David Brewster, ed., *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 90–110.

21. David Brewster, "The Red Flag Follows Trade: China's Future as an Indian Ocean Power," in *Strategic Asia 2018–19: Mapping China's Expanding Strategic Ambitions* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 175–210.

- bolstering China's soft-power influence, including its reputation as a responsible international actor;
- undertaking counterterrorism activities, unilaterally or with partners, against organizations that threaten China;
- collecting intelligence in support of operational requirements and against key adversaries;
- supporting efforts aimed at coercive diplomacy toward small countries in the region; and
- enabling effective operations in a conflict environment—namely, the ability to deter, mitigate, or terminate a state-sponsored interdiction of trade bound for China and to meaningfully hold at risk US or Indian assets in the event of a wider conflict.[22]

Although the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs)—particularly, energy imports from the Persian Gulf and Africa—is a crucial imperative for China, in practice, other imperatives may become just as important in influencing the composition, size, and locations of China's regional military presence. The People's Liberation Army must be capable of responding to a range of contingencies in the region. But, although the size of its naval and military presence in the IOR has been growing, China has so far been relatively cautious and incremental in its approach.

As part of its calculations, China must consider a complicated strategic environment in the IOR that involves a three-way competition among China, the United States, and India (although competition between the latter two is muted). Sino-American competition in the IOR is derivative of global competition between these countries. In contrast, the Sino-Indian relationship involves a quite different and sometimes more intense strategic dynamic. Indeed, the Indian Ocean has an important role in the overall relationship between India and China. In almost every dimension (economic power and the nuclear and conventional balance in the Himalayas), India is at a strategic disadvantage with China. Only in the Indian Ocean does India have the upper hand, meaning Delhi might, for example, be tempted to escalate a conflict in the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean.[23] Rivalry with India therefore substantially complicates China's calculations in the IOR, increasing the capabilities the country would need to deal with a wide range of contingencies. Overall, compared with the Soviet Union, China probably faces a significantly more complex strategic environment in the IOR.

As noted, the geographic constraints faced by China in the IOR are similar to those previously faced by the Soviet Union. As will be discussed later, China is seeking to mitigate these constraints through:

22. Joshua White, "China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence and Military Advantage," Brookings Institution (website), June 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf; and Brewster, "Red Flag."

23. David Brewster, "India-China Conflict: A Move from the Himalayas to the High Seas?," *Interpreter* (blog), July 10, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-china-conflict-move-himalayas-high-seas.

- developing new land routes through Pakistan and Myanmar to facilitate land-based access to the Indian Ocean, including through oil and gas pipelines;
- developing maritime logistical infrastructure to support an extended naval presence;
- developing air access points; and
- opportunistically building political partnerships with Indian Ocean states, including through the development of economic dependencies.

China's Future Naval Presence in the IOR

The PLA Navy currently has a leading role in China's military presence in the IOR, reflecting China's key strategic imperative of SLOC protection and other interests in the maritime domain and, perhaps, the political advantages of a small and relatively transient naval footprint. The PLA Navy is now pursuing a two-ocean strategy that has involved revising PLAN doctrine and developing new capabilities, facilities, and arrangements with host countries. Importantly, the PLA Navy's deployment in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 has also given it a decade's head start in developing its expeditionary capabilities in the region compared to the PLA Ground Force and PLA Air Force (PLAAF).

Command arrangements for the region are likely to evolve in conjunction with its naval presence. Despite unconfirmed reports the PLA Navy intended to establish a fourth fleet with responsibility for the Indian Ocean, to date, PLAN operations in the Indian Ocean have been conducted by multiple fleets.[24] These operations are generally overseen by PLAN headquarters in Beijing because the region is not yet clearly assigned to a specific theater command.[25]

The size and composition of PLAN deployments to the Indian Ocean have evolved since 2008. Deployments now include an anti-piracy task force of around three ships (which typically include two surface combatants and a support vessel) and four to five hydrographic and intelligence collection vessels and other auxiliaries, plus submarines. In 2017, the Indian Navy estimated an average of eight PLAN vessels were deployed in the Indian Ocean, although numbers spike during an exercise in the region or when task groups cross over in transit.[26] Since 2010, the PLA Navy's presence has included regular deployments of the hospital ship 和平方舟 (*Peace Ark*), which has provided medical services to tens of thousands of local people in Bangladesh, Djibouti, Kenya, Maldives, Seychelles, Tanzania, and other countries.

The future shape and composition of the PLA Navy's presence in the IOR is uncertain, and its future presence may grow to resemble that of the US Navy, particularly if Beijing seeks to have

24. David McDonough, "Hainan Island and China's South Sea Fleet," *Strategist* (blog), March 19, 2015, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hainan-island-and-chinas-south-sea-fleet/.

25. Randall G. Shriver et al., "China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia," United States Institute of Peace (website), December 2020, https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/chinas-influence-conflict-dynamics-south-asia.

26. Press Trust of India, "India Begins Project to Build Six Nuclear-Powered Submarines," NDTV (website), December 1, 2017, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-begins-project-to-build-6-nuclear-powered-submarines-1782555; and *Sentinel* Digital Desk, "China Navy's Forays Spike amid COVID-19 Pandemic," *Sentinel* (website), May 31, 2020, https://www.sentinelassam.com/national-news/chinese-navys-forays-spike-amid-covid-19-pandemic-479947.

the ability to protect its Indian Ocean SLOCs. This capability would be a major undertaking, requiring the sustained deployment of large numbers of ships, including aircraft carriers and submarines, and land-based aircraft, including long-range maritime surveillance and strike aircraft. The capability would require several naval and air bases in the region and the development of local military partnerships. Such a strategy may focus on the Persian Gulf and northwestern Indian Ocean, but the strategy would also require operational access in the southwestern, central, and eastern parts of the Indian Ocean, including the Southeast Asian maritime choke points. Unlike the United States, which can access the Persian Gulf by either the westabout route or the eastabout route, in practice, China can only access the Persian Gulf by transiting the Southeast Asian choke points.

Beijing may judge protecting the entirety of China's Indian Ocean SLOCs against threats from the United States and India is impractical. Rather than dispersing naval resources to distant waters in a theater that is essentially secondary, the People's Liberation Army may choose to focus principally on threats in the Pacific while pursuing more limited strategic objectives in the IOR, such as military operations other than war (MOOTW) or a limited contingency or sea-denial strategy.

The PLA Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean over the last decade has focused overwhelmingly on MOOTW, including anti-piracy operations, noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs), and naval diplomacy. These operations will likely continue to be a major focus of China's regional concerns, and the operations might increasingly evolve to include limited, coercive gunboat diplomacy (for instance, in disputes over access to fishing or other marine resources), as has been the case elsewhere. This evolution might require additional Chinese naval resources, which would potentially be supplemented by vessels from the Chinese coast guard or other maritime agencies for the protection of Chinese fishing vessels and other assets.[27] The Chinese coast guard fleet currently includes 130 vessels weighing more than 1,000 tons.

China may develop additional capabilities over time sufficient to provide limited or asymmetrical options for responding to some contingencies. With these capabilities, China could create local superiority, respond to a limited distant blockade, provide naval support for local interventions, or undertake limited sea-denial operations. All of these missions would be broadly analogous to the Soviet Union's Indian Ocean strategy from the mid-1970s. This expanded capability could provide China with options for responding to certain contingencies at a fraction of the cost of a full sea-control strategy.

An enhanced submarine presence or land-based systems could provide valuable sea-denial capabilities in the Indian Ocean. China has increased both conventional and nuclear submarine deployments to the Indian Ocean. But lack of access to submarine support facilities would mean, in a contingency, the PLA Navy would be forced to surge submarines into the Indian Ocean through the narrow Southeast Asian choke points, where they could

27. David Brewster, "Chinese Fishing Fleet a Security Issue for Australia," *Interpreter* (blog), November 7, 2018, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-fishing-fleet-security-issue-australia; and Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Chinese Navy Piracy Patrol Shepherds Fishing Fleet through Gulf of Aden," USNI News (website), January 6, 2022, https://news.usni.org/2022/01/06/chinese-navy-piracy-patrol-shepherds-fishing-fleet-through-gulf-of-aden.

be tracked and interdicted relatively easily. The development of Chinese-controlled submarine support facilities would therefore be an important indicator of Beijing's strategy. A sea-denial strategy might also involve some land-based capabilities. Missiles based on Chinese territory would in theory cover parts of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, but the distances involved would limit their effectiveness. China would therefore need to deploy such systems locally.[28]

Overcoming Constraints on Naval Access

As with the Soviet Navy, the PLA Navy is subject to significant constraints on operational access to the IOR, including:

- extreme distances from home ports in the western Pacific;
- access to the region through narrow choke points in the Indonesian Archipelago; and
- imperatives to acquire or develop local support facilities.

These factors mean access to naval support facilities would be a key factor in any sustained Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. But the nature and extent of China's basing requirements would also depend on its overall strategy. A strategy focused on MOOTW could be satisfied through relying as much as possible on a "places not bases" approach of negotiating assured access rights to commercial facilities while minimizing the need for bases.

Driven by needs such as support for China's anti-piracy task force; China's UN peacekeeping presence in Africa; and likely future NEOs in Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. The People's Liberation Army could also use the base as a hub for supporting counterterrorism operations and training for forward-deployed forces. Currently, around 2,000 army, navy, and special forces personnel are deployed to the base. The port facilities, which are currently undergoing expansion, will allow for the docking of up to four vessels, including replenishment and amphibious vessels.[29] Several factors, however, limit the base's utility for operations beyond MOOTW. The base's short (400-meter) airfield means, for manned, fixed-wing aircraft, China must share Djibouti's international airport with the United States and others. The Chinese base's proximity to US and French facilities would also make the base of questionable value in a major conflict.

Therefore, China's base in Djibouti will not necessarily be a model for other naval support facilities in the region. Any significant and sustained Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean with missions beyond MOOTW would likely require support facilities comparable to traditional bases, along with associated airfields under Chinese operational control.[30]

China's approach to securing local facilities of this nature appears to be quite different and much more deliberate and comprehensive compared with the Soviet approach in the 1970s and 1980s.

28. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense), 371.

29. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125 (2020): 731–47.

30. McDevitt, *Great Power Competition*, 2.

China may be seeking to build "strategic strong points," as they are sometimes called, as part of a network of supply, logistics, and intelligence hubs across the IOR. The characteristics of these strong points would include:

- strategic location, positioned astride major SLOCs or near vital maritime choke points;
- high-level coordination among Chinese party-state officials, state-owned enterprises, and private firms;
- comprehensive commercial scope, including Chinese-led development of associated rail, road, and pipeline infrastructure and efforts to promote trade, financing, industry, resource extraction, and inland markets; and
- potential or actual military use, with dual-use functions that can enable both economic and military activities.[31]

Whether such a strategy would be successful in yielding assured access to naval support facilities, including under wartime conditions, is unclear. The Department of Defense recently noted Beijing has considered or inquired about basing or logistics facilities in numerous countries in the IOR, including Angola, Indonesia, Kenya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates.[32] With the exception of Djibouti, no potential host country has offered bases or facilities to the PLA Navy. Indeed, in recent years, several potential host countries have pushed back about the terms of potential port developments (for example, Myanmar and Tanzania) as well as popular concerns about allegations of associated corruption (Maldives).[33] Even when host countries have pushed back against China's plans, projects have sometimes been given the go-ahead on new terms.[34]

The new port at Gwadar, Pakistan, located around 400 kilometers east of the Strait of Hormuz, is often identified as the most likely location of another Chinese naval base in the northwestern Indian Ocean. Chinese analysts reportedly view Gwadar as a top choice for establishing a new, overseas strategic strongpoint because of its prime geographic location and strong Sino-Pakistani ties. Importantly, Gwadar also represents a potential exit to the ocean, which would for the first time involve the creation of an overland link between Chinese territory and the Indian Ocean via a corridor through Pakistan. The port has been under Chinese management since 2013 and now includes extensive port infrastructure, a new airfield with a 3,600-meter runway,

31. Conor Kennedy, "Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy," *China Brief* 19, no. 6 (March 22, 2019): 19–26.

32. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments*.

33. Eric Olander, "Tanzania: Why Bagamoyo Port Deal with China Is an Uphill Battle," Africa Report (website), July 1, 2021, https://www.theafricareport.com/104597/tanzania-why-bagamoyo-port-deal-with-china-is-an-uphill-battle/; Kanupriya Kapoor and Aye Min Thant, "Exclusive: Myanmar Scales Back Chinese-Backed Port Project Due to Debt Fears – Official," Reuters (website), August 2, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-china-port-exclusive-idUSKBN1KN106; and Editors, "Maldives Voters Sweep Away the Remnants of a Corrupt, China-Backed Regime," World Politics Review (website), April 23, 2019, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/27783/maldives-voters-sweep-away-the-remnants-of-a-corrupt-china-backed-regime.

34. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Myanmar Junta Expedites Work on China Funded Kyaukphyu Port," *Economic Times* (website), August 9, 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/myanmar-junta-expedites-work-on-china-funded-kyaukphyu-port/articleshow/85167272.cms?from=mdr.

and a 600-meter deepwater quay that can accommodate up to three 50,000-ton ships. Though uncertainty about Pakistan's political commitments might reduce Gwadar's utility as a wartime base, the port could become a key peacetime replenishment or transfer point for PLA equipment and personnel. Replenishment could even be undertaken by commercial vessels operating out of Gwadar, which would reduce international criticism.[35] Despite claims by many analysts, however, the People's Liberation Army has not used Gwadar, though one PLA officer was reported as having commented, "The food is already on the plate; we'll eat it whenever we want to."[36]

Any comprehensive Chinese naval presence in the IOR likely would also require assured access to facilities in the southwestern Indian Ocean, though local states have so far been reluctant hosts. Some have speculated China has sought naval access arrangements in the Seychelles and at Walvis Bay in Namibia, neither of which have eventuated.[37] Bagamoyo in Tanzania, where China was planning to invest some $10 billion in a new deepwater port with a 99-year lease, has been suggested as another possible location for Chinese-controlled facilities. In April 2020, the Tanzanian president reportedly canceled the deal after China refused to renegotiate its terms, but the deal may now have been revived.[38] Several other economically and politically weak states in and around the southwestern Indian Ocean may be susceptible to offers of Chinese assistance, including Comoros, Madagascar, and Mozambique. The incipient insurgency Mozambique is now experiencing in its northern province could also lead to political fragility and the need for security assistance.

Any strategy involving the protection of Chinese SLOCs from major competitors would also require naval facilities in the central and eastern Indian Ocean to secure the SLOCs that pass through Southeast Asia and across the northern Indian Ocean. Though Beijing has several potential locations from which to choose, its progress in establishing a foreign port has been limited. Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka is frequently cited as a likely candidate, especially after China gained effective control of the port in 2017. In December of that year, a Chinese state-owned company gained an effective 70 percent equity interest in a 99-year lease for the port. Although the Sri Lankan government has created a separate management company, the details of ownership and control remain murky. The PLA Navy doubtless intends to use the port for logistical support.[39] The nearby airport with a 3,500-meter runway would also be of significant value, but the extent to which the Sri Lankan government would allow China to control port facilities is unclear. Further, although it is close to major sea lanes, the port's proximity to Indian air bases makes it vulnerable.[40]

35. Isaac B. Kardon, Connor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, *Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan*, China Maritime Report no. 7 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, 2020), 50.

36. Kardon, Kennedy, and Dutton, *Gwadar*, 51.

37. Adam Hartman, "Chinese Naval Base for Walvis Bay," *Namibian*, November 19, 2017.

38. Prachi Mittal, "Falling Apart—A Story of the Tanzanian Bagamayo Port Project," Observer Research Foundation (website), September 15, 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/falling-apart-a-story-of-the-tanzanian-bagamoyo-port-project/; and Olander, "Tanzania."

39. Rear Admiral Hu Zhongming (deputy chief of staff, People's Liberation Army Navy), interview by the author, October 21, 2019.

40. Daniel J. Kostecka, "Places and Bases: The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (2011).

China is also building a new deepwater port at Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, including proposed features that suggest future military use. For instance, China reportedly sought to dredge the Kyaukpyu port much more deeply than would be required for commercial vessels.[41] This port is also the terminus of a new overland pathway being constructed from southern China through Myanmar. The government of Myanmar significantly scaled back development plans due to its fear of losing control of the port if the government were unable to repay its debts.[42] Before construction on this port began, Myanmar's leaders, famously protective of the nation's sovereignty, had always refused China permission to undertake military activities from Myanmar territory.[43]

In previous years, the Maldives, located in the central Indian Ocean, also became the object of strategic competition between China and India.[44] A worst-case scenario would involve the Maldives granting the PLA Navy or the PLA Air Force access to the former British port and air base on the island of Gan, located only 740 kilometers north of Diego Garcia. But the country has tilted away from Beijing (for the time being) due to the 2018 election of a new administration that is keen to develop security links with India and the United States.[45]

China's Future Airpower Presence in the IOR

China should also be expected to develop its regional airpower capabilities through the PLA Air Force or PLA Naval Air Force. China requires airpower capabilities in support of various MOOTW, including support for NEOs, UN peacekeeping missions, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, and limited military tasks. The Chinese government has conducted several NEOs in (or staged through) the IOR and nearby areas, including in Timor-Leste (2006), Thailand (2008), Egypt (2011), Libya (2011), Iraq (2014), and Yemen (2015). The 2011 evacuation of 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya was the largest and most complex operation to date. The operation included the evacuation of around 2,000 people on PLAAF aircraft staging through Khartoum, Sudan. Difficulties faced in the evacuation may have caused Beijing to reconsider its need for foreign military bases.[46] Further, large NEOs should be expected in the future as the number of Chinese nationals grows in Africa and West Asia. The People's Liberation Army may also play a growing role in NEOs as it gains experience in expeditionary operations in difficult environments.

41. David Brewster, "China's Play for Military Bases in the Eastern Indian Ocean," *Interpreter* (blog), May 15, 2018, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-play-military-bases-eastern-indian-ocean.

42. Jason Koutsoukis, "The Fishing Port That May Become a $10 Billion Chinese Debt Bomb," Bloomberg (website), May 10, 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-10/the-fishing-port-that-may-become-a-10-billion-chinese-debt-bomb; and Nan Lwin, "Construction on China's BRI Deep Sea Port to Start Soon in Myanmar's Rakhine State: Govt," *Irrawaddy* (website), June 24, 2020, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/construction-chinas-bri-deep-sea-port-start-soon-myanmars-rakhine-state-govt.html.

43. Andrew Selth, "Burma's Mythical Isles," *Australian Quarterly* 80, no. 6 (2008): 24–28.

44. David Brewster, *Between Giants: The Sino-Indian Cold War in the Indian Ocean*, Asie.Visions 103 (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2018).

45. Abhijnan Rej, "India Welcomes US-Maldives Defense Cooperation Agreement in a Sign of Times," *Diplomat* (website), September 15, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/india-welcomes-us-maldives-defense-cooperation-agreement-in-a-sign-of-times/.

46. Cabestan, "China's Military Base."

An enhanced naval presence beyond MOOTW would require substantial airpower support, including from maritime surveillance and strike aircraft. China's lack of maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean places the country at a major tactical disadvantage with potential adversaries. This deficiency would be difficult to mitigate with satellites, ship-based aircraft, or land-based aircraft operating from Chinese territory.[47] China would thus require capabilities for land-based maritime air surveillance to cover at least three quadrants of the IOR—the southwest, northwest, and northeast. At present, the maritime surveillance capabilities of the PLA Air Force and PLA Naval Air Force are rudimentary, and they have only "nascent" experience with expeditionary operations beyond Chinese territory.[48] Accordingly, China's lack of long-range maritime surveillance capabilities and local airbasing would be a major constraint on its ability to pursue an expansive naval strategy.

China does not yet have facilities in the IOR suitable for manned fixed-wing aircraft. As noted, the Chinese base in Djibouti does not include long runways under Chinese control. The newly built airfield at Gwadar in Pakistan, which includes secure housing and medical facilities, may be a better location for local basing or the staging of aircraft based in western China, potentially providing coverage for much of the northwestern Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.[49] As yet, few credible public reports suggest the People's Liberation Army has used this facility substantially. Nor does the PLA Air Force have assured airfield access in the eastern, central, or southwestern Indian Ocean. This lack of access could significantly constrain any enhanced pan-Indian Ocean military strategy. Several states in the southwestern Indian Ocean could be candidates for PLAAF facilities; indeed, over the last several years, the Russian Air Force has negotiated formal airspace access arrangements with several countries, such as Egypt, Sudan, Madagascar, and Mozambique. One potential location for PLAAF access in the central and eastern Indian Ocean is Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The PLA Air Force could also use the newly Chinese-built 3,400-meter airfield at Dara Sakor, Cambodia, as an access point into the eastern Indian Ocean; doing so would echo the Soviet use of the nearby airfield at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, during the Cold War.[50]

Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga argues the relative lack of focus on airpower may reflect the leading role the PLA Navy has taken in the IOR. For example, one PLAAF researcher asserted, "[T]he People's Liberation Army has not yet established any overseas air transportation support bases due to geopolitical sensitivities and a lack of demand for projection,"

47. Raja Menon, "Scenarios for China's Naval Deployment in the Indian Ocean and India's Naval Response," in Brewster, *India and China at Sea*, 125–36.

48. Mark R. Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017); and Cristina Garafola and Timothy Heath, *The Chinese Air Force's First Steps toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 1.

49. Kardon, Kennedy, and Dutton, *Gwadar*, 50.

50. John Foulkes and Howard Wang, "China's Future Naval Base in Cambodia and the Implications for India," *China Brief* 19, no. 15 (2019): 12–17.

and this gap is becoming a "bottleneck problem" limiting the People's Liberation Army's strategic power projection overseas.[51]

China's Future Land-Power Presence in the IOR

In the short to medium term, Chinese land forces may play a less prominent role in much of the IOR for political and geographic reasons. Beijing's political preference will likely be to minimize China's security footprint by relying as much as possible on local security forces (such as Pakistan's special security detachment of more than 15,000 military personnel committed to the protection of Chinese nationals and assets). China would supplement this reliance on local forces with private-security contractors, both local and China-based.[52]

The Chinese land forces that are currently deployed within the broader IOR include more than 2,000 troops and police participating in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and around 1,000 ground troops stationed in Djibouti.[53] Given the Djibouti base reportedly has accommodations for up to 10,000 personnel, these forces will likely grow in response to future contingencies, potentially including political interventions.[54]

The respective future roles and contributions to China's future land forces in the IOR of the PLA Ground Force, PLAN marines, and paramilitary organizations like the Chinese People's Armed Police Force are not yet clear. The PLA Ground Force might play a more important role in South Asian states that are geographically contiguous with Chinese territory, such as India, Myanmar, and Pakistan. Elsewhere in the region, where China relies on naval and air forces for operational access, PLAN marines may play a greater or a leading role. On several occasions (including in 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2019), amphibious vessels with or without embarked marines have been deployed to the eastern and northwestern Indian Ocean for exercises or as part of the PLA Navy's anti-piracy task groups.[55] Marines of the PLA Navy have also deployed to the base at Djibouti.[56]

51. Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga,"Where to Next?: PLA Considerations for Overseas Base Site Selection," *China Brief* 20, no. 18 (2020): 27–35.

52. Brewster, "Red Flag."

53. Cabestan, "China's Military Base."

54. Cabestan, "China's Military Base."

55. Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2015); Ananth Krishnan, "New Indian Ocean Exercise Shows Reach of China's Navy," *Hindu* (website), February 5, 2014, https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/New-Indian-Ocean-exercise-shows-reach-of-Chinas-Navy/article11530612.ece; Atul Aneja, "'China Deploys Warships in Indian Ocean,'" *Hindu* (website), updated February 21, 2018, https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-deploys-warships-in-indian-ocean/article22808463.ece; and IANS, "Chinese Amphibious Warship Sighted in Indian Ocean," India TV News (website), September 16, 2019, https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/chinese-amphibious-warship-sighted-in-indian-ocean-549925.

56. Minnie Chan, "As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 per Cent Increase to Marine Corps Numbers, Sources Say," *South China Morning Post* (website), March 13, 2017, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078245/overseas-ambitions-expand-china-plans-400pc-increase; and H. I. Sutton, "The Chinese Navy's Unusually Heavily Defended Fortress near the Indian Ocean," *Forbes* (website), May 15, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/05/15/chinas-new-fortress-near-the-middle-east-and-indian-ocean/?sh=4a950e8c4066.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the PLA's future operational access to the IOR, with particular emphasis on geographical challenges and China's strategic imperatives. The chapter included a case study on the Soviet Union's experience during the Cold War as a way of examining the impact of these imperatives and challenges. Although the IOR may now be of greater strategic importance to China than it was to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, geographic constraints will nevertheless mold China's future military presence.

One clear lesson from the Cold War is that geographic constraints on access to the IOR create a strong imperative to secure local bases or assured access rights with local partners, although doing so may be costly. China's relationships with Pakistan (which, among other things, can provide direct land access between Chinese territory and the Indian Ocean), Djibouti (a maritime and air hub for the northwestern Indian Ocean), and Sri Lanka (potentially a key maritime and air hub in the central and eastern Indian Ocean) demonstrate the importance of the imperative to secure access as a driver of China's political, economic, and security relationships in the region. In this respect, China can be expected to exploit regional rivalries and threat perceptions (for instance, between India and some of its South Asian neighbors), to its advantage. But, like the Soviet Union, China may find relationships with some countries—particularly, corrupt and autocratic regimes—are less reliable than it might have hoped.[57] China could also seek to mitigate these difficulties through partnering with Russia, including the use of Russia-controlled facilities, particularly in Africa.[58]

The experience of the Soviet Union also provides the following useful tactical lessons.

1. When onshore naval support is unavailable, potential mitigation strategies include the use of portable equipment, such as floating piers (which naval forces can move if a host revokes onshore access rights) and floating bases (to provide logistical support).
2. Amphibious and noncombatant vessels (such as hospital and hydrographic ships) are valuable for extending regional influence.
3. Deploying large numbers of vessels in the Indian Ocean during normal times may not create lasting superiority in the theater because the United States can swing naval resources between different theaters in response to contingencies.
4. Geography imposes important constraints on airpower access. For example, overflight restrictions can prevent access to local airfields needed to support long-distance transport and surveillance aircraft.

57. Brewster, *Between Giants*.

58. Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Russia and China Team Up on the Indian Ocean," *Interpreter* (blog), December 16, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-and-china-team-indian-ocean.

Finally, the Soviet experience during the Cold War suggests the size and composition of the People's Liberation Army in the IOR will principally be a function of China's interests in the region. China's interests often differ from those of the United States. One cannot assume China's future military presence and regional security relationships will necessarily resemble those of the United States closely.

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