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Article

Importance of East Africa in Indo-Pacific

Neha Sinha

Abstract

The East African region has gained immense importance in recent times mainly because of its strategic location on the west coast of the Indian Ocean, its resources and its economic potential. Many countries, including countries of Indo-Pacific region, are trying to establish their influence and military bases in the region. The significance of Africa as a whole for the safety and security of the Indo-Pacific is growing. It is therefore important to systematically build ties between Asia and Africa through a free and open Indo-Pacific maritime zone, in order to promote stability of the region as both the continents are on the rise and also conflict prone. The article visualises the future of Africa as a "global main player" and its increasing integration with the major states in Asia. It also analyses the significance of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative for the Eastern Africa region.

The Indo-Pacific region is a geopolitical zone that stretches amidst the two regions of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Geographically it covers the vast oceanic region between the east coast of Africa and the Western Pacific Islands. From the beginning of the 21st century the Indo-Pacific has been in global strategic writings and speeches as the region seeks to create a connected multipolar zone that must be governed by commonly agreed international norms, rules and practices. The conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific is complex and the term has been frequently used by Japan since 2009. Although, the "Indo-Pacific" idea was originally coined in 2006-07 for a more constructive geopolitical amalgamation of the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific regions. For the first time in the

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year 2007, the Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament where he emphasised on the "Confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans."

Today, there are various debates emerging amongst the scholars regarding the meaning of the term Indo-Pacific. According to ----the best way to deal with this question would be to "usefully ground the concept in the structure and dynamics of global maritime commerce." (reference) historian Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) echoing Alfred Mahan in his *Elements of Sea Power* (1890) argues that, historically, "new trade routes have given rise to new great powers by restructuring the economic fundamentals of transnational economic flows to shape the order, network, and competitive balance of a new global system. Today when pundits and policymakers talk about the "Pacific Age" or China "ruling the waves" or the strategic notion of the Indo-Pacific, they are imposing a spatial image that largely understates the geo-economic reality of the maritime flow of container traffic carrying the bulk of trade between Asia and European and East Coast US markets."¹

The strategic interest of Japan and India in each other is comparatively new. The idea of Indo-Pacific supplements the contemporary idea and understanding of the Asia-Pacific region. It includes India and states bordering the Indian Ocean, precisely eastern Africa and West Asia, considering it an adequate extension given Asia's breadth as a continent, at the same time placing importance to individual states in the maritime shipping routes. The Indo-Pacific geopolitics is determined by rivers, oceans, bays, Islands and the movement of goods and services from the region². The concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as a goal articulated for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) in Manila in the year 2017 involves Japan, the United States, Australia and India – though the geographical reach of the Indo-Pacific arena is understood differently by each state. The QSD initially came into being to give a better geopolitical understanding of the Indo-Pacific. This anticipates, according to an analysis, "the two oceans as a single security space, which includes India and Japan bridged by Australia, and is undergirded by U.S. maritime dominance. The impetus for such a reconceptualization is simple: Japan and India, isolated as they are in their own oceans, want to balance against the Western Pacific's rising power, China, by uniting under a single geopolitical sphere"³.

The repercussions of using the term Indo-Pacific are twofold: it focuses on two interrelated and connected oceans, with its prime focus on maritime lanes and connectivity, that includes India, and to a lesser extent, Africa. More importantly, it links up with Japan, with its strong ties with the United States and the West, drawing attention to a shared, near-global focus. (SCMP, 2017)⁴. Any Indo-Pacific Strategy should not be casually disregarded. Although India, Japan, the United States and Australia have different approaches towards

China but somewhere down the line they are united in their concerns over China's economic and political development strategy for the region. In other words, *"behind the Indo-Pacific you have Japan's economic support, India's development speed and Australia's fears of China, these are all strategic realities."*⁵ According to Jia Wenshan at the Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization, *"China needs to as soon as possible deal with the Indo-Pacific alliance, as it is absolutely in conflict with Belt and Road [Initiative],"*. This is seen in a reference to China's strategy to establish political, trade and infrastructure ties stretching from China through Central and Southeast Asia to Africa.⁶

East Africa in the Indo-Pacific Realm

It has been argued that, Eastern Africa and the western Indian Ocean should form a major part of any strategy developed by Japan, India or others given its strategic geography as the western bookend of this emerging regional construct. According to Lal⁷, *"Eastern Africa almost certainly does not figure in Washington's nascent strategy, which clearly delineates its Indo-Pacific realm as stretching from San Francisco westward to Mumbai on the west coast of India."* However, this may simply be a technique for Washington to demarcate the newly-named Indo-Pacific Command's area of operation against that of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), which is accountable for military operations with fifty-four African countries and US Central Command (USCENTCOM), with its area increasing its extent across West Asia to Pakistan's border with India.



Source: Wikimedia commons; Peter Fitzgerald, amendments by Burmesedays, East Africa regions map, Names of cities by authorship of the accompanying article, CC BY-SA 3.0

East Africa, especially the horn of Africa, is a highly contested region, with many actors involved. For instance, in Somalia we see the involvement of Turkey, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Italy, United Kingdom, United States, China, United Nations, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, African Union and the European Union. They all have a stake in the political and economic developments in Somalia. Cannon⁸ is of the opinion that as Somalia is ruled by a weak government, it is easier for other countries to influence and seek control over the outcome of elections and develop relations with Somalia. In addition, "efforts at keeping the peace, security sector reform (SSR) and capacity building – watchwords of the international community and sacred to multilateralists – often become instruments in the hands of state and non-state actors attempting to further influence political outcomes or extend influence and earn money in a part of the world that is written about often but rarely understood and even less visited, thus allowing for graft and corruption to flourish ala Afghanistan, Iraq and other stabilization zones."⁹

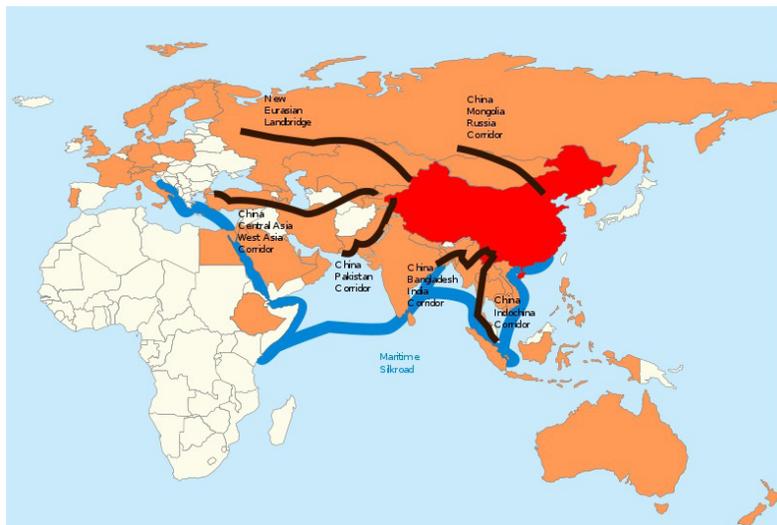
Eastern Africa like other parts of the continent is rich in natural resources, including oil and natural gas. These resources are in abundance, but difficult to extract and export due to lack of ports and navigable rivers. Hence, ports are important as they enable the entry and exit to the continent. Mombasa in Kenya is the largest and a major port of east Africa. As per Gidado¹⁰, it is the only natural deep-water port of substantial size along the entire stretch of the eastern Africa coast till Djibouti, at the southern entrance of the Red Sea. There are other ports too, but they are smaller in size, which cannot accept the largest container vessels and cargo ships. Djibouti located in the horn of Africa has a strategic location. It is situated at major sea lanes and offers potential control of the world's major maritime routes. Djibouti has multiple foreign military bases, including France, US, Italy, China and Japan who have maintained their presence in the region. The various port infrastructures in Djibouti are in contention. The global giant DP World possessed thirty-year concession to operate Djibouti's most critical port infrastructure, the Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT). However, it was forcibly removed by the government of Djibouti in February 2018¹¹. Thereafter Djibouti signed a deal with Singapore-based Pacific International Lines, apparently to enhance traffic to the port. Prior to this in August 2017, PIL signed a MoU with China. The United States and France expressed concern, but Djibouti declared that it would give DCT to China.

Many countries, including countries of the Indo-Pacific region, are trying to establish their bases in the East African region. For instance, Somalia has a Turkish base just outside Mogadishu. Similarly, Djibouti has multiple foreign military bases -- those of France, US, Italy, China and Japan. This has alarmed regional and international actors. The UAE has agreed to construct a military base and use an airport at the Somaliland port of Berbera.

UAE also has a naval facility at Assab in Eritrea. As per the reports, Qatar has agreed to finance a deal signed by Turkey with Sudan to reconstruct the port of Suakin on the Red Sea, causing discontentment amongst Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The United States has a small naval presence at Lamu in Kenya, and is building a large military facility in the interior of Somalia at Baledogle¹². In addition, in October 2018, India and Japan began negotiations on a military base sharing Agreement. India initiated the discussion for an agreement on military logistics that would allow India to access Japan’s Djibouti facilities. According to the report by the Halbeeg Staff “*beyond the ports, military exercises and natural resource exploitation efforts, China is also reportedly interested in constructing a new port on the central Somalia coast at Hobyond. It is one of a handful of countries that maintains an embassy in Mogadishu, thus signaling Somalia is now a target of Chinese investment as part of its BRI strategy.*”¹³

China’s MSR initiative and its impact on the Eastern Africa

The One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI) by China comprises of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) that intends to link China to the Indo-Pacific region and Europe by land and sea routes. The primary objective of MSRI is to build sea routes with faster connectivity to boost trade along the land and sea based Silk Road, connecting Asia with Europe and Africa. Under the framework of MSRI, China has been procuring the rights to develop and operate a chain of ports extending from its coast to the southern part of Asia to Africa, West Asia, South America and Europe.



Belt and Road Initiative, image via Wikimedia Commons

Source: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-mediterranean-silk-road/>

One of the major maritime highways of all international trade routes is the Mediterranean Sea which is a pivotal point as it is the western end of the BRI. China has established its presence in the Mediterranean region by procuring, building, modernising, expanding, and operating Mediterranean ports and terminals in Greece, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey, and Israel. According to an Israeli analyst, "Beijing wants to capitalize on the Mediterranean's geographical proximity to become a major distribution hub for Chinese goods to the EU, its biggest trading partner." Further he says that "*the cumulative economic ties between China and Europe are giving the Mediterranean region an opportunity to regain its place at the forefront of international trade. The newly enlarged Suez Canal, the main transport route between Asia and Europe, has doubled in terms of both capacity and traffic flow between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. It now allows for the passage of larger vessels, reducing transit times between Asia and Europe and raising the competitiveness and visibility of Mediterranean ports*".³⁴

China possesses the busiest shipping ports on earth. It is the world's third largest ship owning nation and the leading shipbuilding nation, with roughly 30 million compensated gross tonnes (CGT). Chinese enterprises are active in the construction and management of ports around the globe. By constructing and managing the ports and international shipping assets along the MSR and by building faster connectivity through the sea routes, China's plan is to establish itself as a global maritime power. China's presence in the East African region has considerably increased, and one can clearly notice the benefits of MSR in the improvement of transport and other infrastructure connectivity built by it. China has built a railroad connecting Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, to the port of Djibouti for US\$3.6 billion. Chinese enterprises are seeking opportunities for oil and gas in eastern Ethiopia near the Somali border. In June 2018, Chinese company Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Holdings Limited and the government of Ethiopia initiated test production of the first barrel of Ethiopian crude oil.

China, of course, is not the only country building big infrastructure and investing in Ethiopia, Italy has invested in constructing Africa's largest dam on the Blue Nile. Ethiopia is also Turkey's largest investment destination in Africa with around 160 investment projects³⁵. But it is China that is most active in multiple sectors. It has completed the Standard Gauge Railway running from the port of Mombasa to Nairobi. This US\$3.4 billion railroad has improved travel between Nairobi and the coast, which has increased domestic tourism to Kenya's north and south coast beaches. However, Kenya is highly in debt to China, over US\$7 billion, "*raising concerns of possible meddling in internal Kenyan affairs*"³⁶. Also, China and Turkey have initiated building a railroad in Tanzania. Also, Tanzania will also host an

oil pipeline from Uganda's oil fields to the port of Tanga on the Indian Ocean. As per Musisi and Muhumuza, *"This route will bypass Kenya entirely and contradicts a previous feasibility study by Toyota Tsusho that advocated a northern route across Kenya to the new port that was supposed to be built by Japanese and Chinese companies and loans at Lamu. France's Total, which has major stakes in Uganda's oil fields and also throughout the Rift Valley, was opposed to the northern route and pushed with Uganda to fund the southern route through Tanga."*¹⁷ Mozambique which lies in the southern east part of the African continent has substantial gas reserves. Along, with the Portuguese and South African firms, both China and Japan are eager to establish their presence in the region. Thus, it can be said that China has poured huge investment in building infrastructure in the East African region along the MSR.

Critics of China's growing presence in the African region claim that *"China's financing of African infrastructure projects in exchange for the continent's natural resources is of an exploitative nature, a "neo-colonialist" or "neo-imperialist" behavior not very different from what the European powers did a century ago."* Critics further contend that *"China's BRI, especially the MSR, would aggravate the indebtedness of many African countries, and that increasing engagement of Chinese businesses and workers may to certain degree disturb the existing social order in some African countries and lead to higher unemployment rates"*¹⁸. Despite the criticism the MSR will certainly increase the volume of exports and jobs as well as promote cultural and people-to-people exchange, establishing a massive inter-connected economic zone from the swiftly developing Indo-Pacific region to the east African region. There is a great prospect for revived of trade and investment, as well as the promotion of technology transfer and human interaction. Also, the MSR will help strengthen the existing bilateral ties, which would contribute to closer cooperation between China and Africa.

India and East Africa

The Importance of Africa for India can be witnessed in various ways. From a 'hopeless continent' to a 'hopeful continent', Africa has become the future for all given its demography, resources, markets, etc. Both India and Africa share historical bonds. If we go back to the Bandung Conference of 1955 -- for which India was a prime initiator --, it is noteworthy that the conference was not only about Asia or non-alignment but prime importance was given to promote Afro-Asian solidarity. Africa also has strategic significance for India in relations to trade and investments, diaspora, South-South cooperation, UNSC reforms, cooperation in global issues such as climate change and WTO reforms. Africa is rich in oil (Nigeria), uranium (South Africa), and abundance of other vital mineral resources. Africa's growing population and markets provide new opportunities for goods and services exports from India. The countries on the eastern coast also play a vital role in promoting

peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean region (including the trade relations across and beyond Africa and interests of Indian diaspora in Africa).

Africa is increasingly significant for the safety and security of the Indo-Pacific. India has been fortifying its relations with Africa. However, the growth in engagement between India and Africa in recent years has been dwarfed by the huge attention given to China's expanding activities in the region. Although, India's investment is smaller in scale, but it has strong historical ties with some Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, and a substantial Indian diaspora is present in African countries. India's engagement with Africa has always been cordial.

In 2014, India surpassed the United States as Africa's third-largest trading partner behind the EU and China. In the year 2014, bilateral trade between India and Africa reached \$71bn, as compared to \$8.2bn in 2000. India imports crude petroleum and refined petroleum but due to low commodity prices trade between both the countries declined. In 2016, trade dropped to \$ 47.3bn. During African Development Bank (AFDB) annual meeting in 2017 India stated that it expects trade with Africa to touch \$100bn in the coming years. India is among the top five trading partners for a large number of African economies. An active Indian diaspora and well-established Indian firms have aided closer economic ties with Africa. India has strong historical ties with countries like Mauritius, Kenya and Tanzania; India's thriving ties in the region in recent years have been with Ethiopia. Ethiopia has attracted significant Indian investments as it has been one of the fastest-growing economies in the region and also due to its government's focus on power and manufacturing (textiles) that are closely aligned with Indian interests. Ethiopia is also the prime African beneficiary of long-term concessional credit from India, with \$1 billion in credit to the government for a sugar factory and infrastructure development. India has been an active investor in East Africa for many years. The major part of the investment has been made by the private-sector companies rather than government-to-government interaction typical of China's engagement in Africa. Indian companies have been extremely active in sectors such as telecom, oil and gas, agriculture and power, and are engaged with number of economies in the region. India's overseas direct investments in Africa, excluding Mauritius, was at \$3.5billion between 2010-2016. Africa is also the focus of \$3.9bn Indian credit since 2002 to help Indian businesses grow and export more to African region.

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However, the amount of India's investment in Africa has not been able to match that of China. China's FDI in 2014 (\$3.2bn) was almost equal to India's overseas direct investment

in Africa from 2010-16 (\$3.5bn). At the African Development Bank Group (AFDB) 2017, PM Modi launched the vision document for 'Asia-Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC), a joint initiative between India and Japan discussed in November 2016. AAGC aims at boosting trade and investment in the region by improving infrastructure and facilitating trade. According to Glen, "India is trying to counterbalance China's influence in the region which is seen as a retaliation to China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative. Both India and Japan do not match China's investments in Africa, and it is hoped that collaboration with other Asian powers will provide a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region. The geographical focus of the AAGC in Africa will be more comprehensive than China's One Belt One Road initiative as that mainly focuses on the East Africa region. The main objective of AAGC is to develop a corridor linking coastal countries like Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa and Kenya with landlocked countries and further connect it to South Asia through Chabahar port in Iran and then to India. The projects will need Japan's assistance. The AAGC also aims to engage with island countries like Mauritius.

With China having set up its first naval base in Djibouti, India is making its effort to establish its presence in the region. As a result of opening of China's military base in Djibouti, and increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy has initiated seven continuous deployments. Chinese presence in Djibouti and its 'String of Pearls' policy has raised concerns within the Indian military, as it is strategically located near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which separates the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden and safeguards the approaches to the Suez Canal. To enhance regional capabilities in law enforcement and safeguard its maritime interests the INS (Indian Naval Ship) Trikand participated in a multilateral training exercise CUTLASS EXPRESS – 19 from January 27 to February 6, 2019. According to India's Ministry of Defence¹⁹, the main objective of the exercise was to enhance the efficiency of law enforcement, promote regional security and improve interoperability among the armed forces of the participating countries in order to prevent illegal maritime activities in the Western Indian Ocean. In the exercise, Naval, Coast Guard and Marine Police personnel from East African countries were trained by mentors from USA, India, and Netherlands, with the help and collaboration of international organisations like the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), Combined Maritime Force (CMF) and European Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR). The Indian Navy played an important role in planning, coordinating and executing the CUTLASS EXPRESS – 19. Further, the Ministry of Defence stated, "Through INS Trikand, the IN provided a platform for live Visit Board Search Seizure (VBSS) drills, which proved to be of immense training value to the participating nations."²⁰ Such multilateral exercises are of great significance, as they promote regional understanding, capacity building and security. By organising and participating in such exercises India has

strengthened its maritime ties with the African nations, including Djibouti. India also wants to expand its ties in the region, including with Djibouti; efforts are being made by the leaders of the countries to deepen the engagement.

Conclusion

The East African region has gained immense importance in recent times, mainly because of its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific. Many countries, including countries of Indo-Pacific region, are trying to establish their bases in the East African region. Chinese influence in the region has risen significantly as a result of the BRI and MSR policy.. China has hugely invested in building infrastructure in the East African region. The MSR will increase the volume of exports and jobs as well as promote cultural exchange, establishing a massive inter-connected economic zone. Also, the MSR will help strengthen the existing bilateral ties between China and Africa.

Besides China's BRI, India also has launched several initiatives to strengthen its presence in the East African region. India has invested in constructing port facilities across the coastal areas of Duqm in Oman, Changi in Singapore, Assumption Island in the Seychelles, Sabang in Indonesia, and Sittwe in Myanmar, and facilitates in Madagascar and Mauritania. India has signed agreements with the United States that would permit Indian ships to enter US bases in Djibouti, Diego Garcia, Guam, and Subic Bay in the Philippines. Besides, India has also developed robust naval cooperation with France for joint patrols that enable its ships entree to French naval bases in Djibouti and Reunion Island. In order to ensure China's growing military presence in the maritime zone and influence in the East African Region is not destabilising, India is working with others to ensure an open, peaceful and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

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