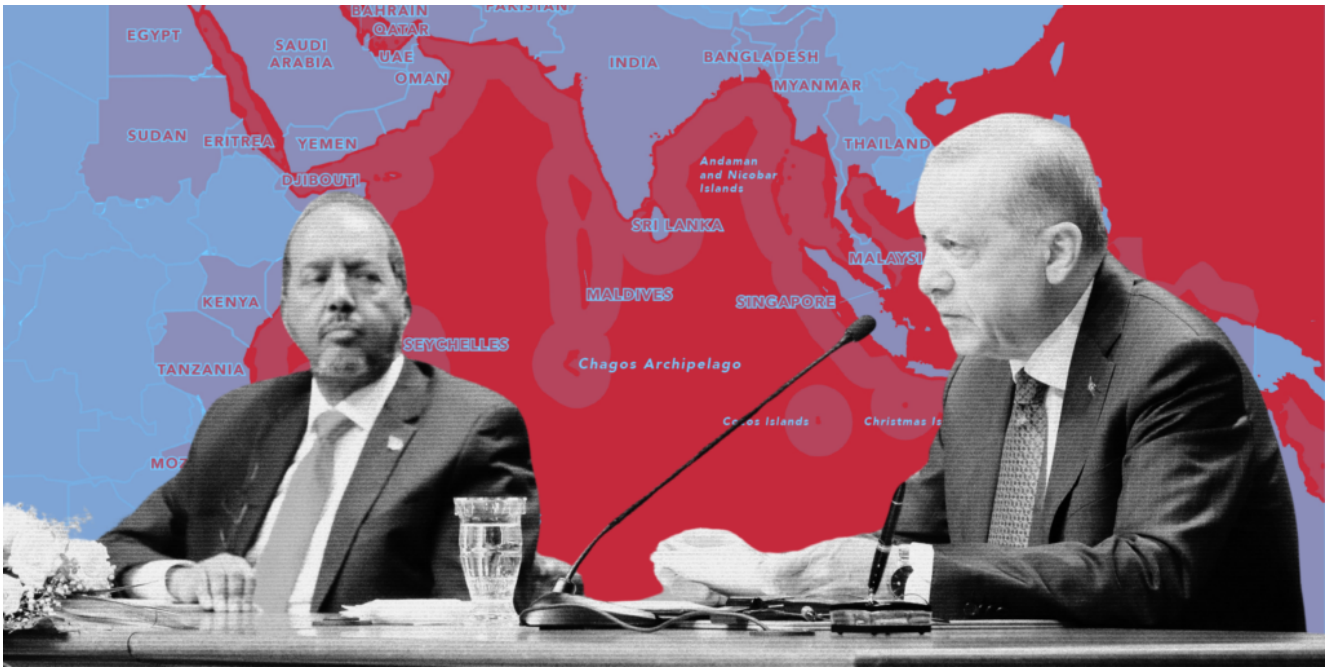
Turkey’s Expanding Strategic Space in the Indian Ocean Region

September 19, 2024



Turkey seems poised to enter the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) with a stamp of permanency. The initial steps include the ongoing Somalia-Ethiopia dispute, the Turkey-Somalia defense and economic agreement, the intention to deploy Turkish naval ships to safeguard oil exploration, and the plan to set up a space rocket and missile firing test site in Somalia. Further, selling drones to the Maldives indicates the potential Turkish influence in the region. This, combined with China’s increasing naval and economic presence, could heavily impact the IOR dynamics, raising the level of threats, challenges, and risks for India.

Turkey’s Strategic Moves in Somalia and the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia is supporting the independence of Somaliland from Somalia, for which Addis Ababa will get access to the Gulf of Aden through Somalia. Turkey is trying to broker a deal

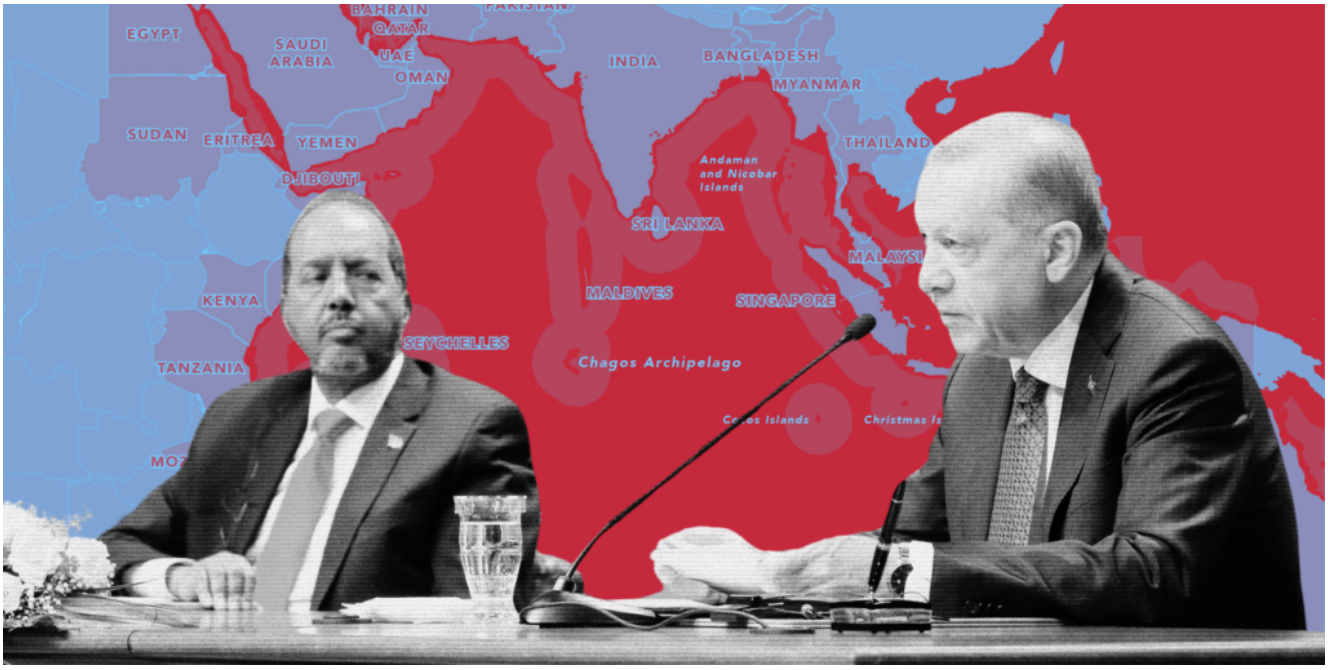
between the two countries in this ongoing tussle. Although the second round of talks has not succeeded, the effort indicates an increasing Turkish interest in Africa. Turkey may have a Somalian tilt, given the defense and economic cooperation deal signed with Mogadishu in February 2024 and an oil and gas cooperation agreement for exploration in the Horn of Africa in March 2024. The defense part of the deal aims to establish a Somalian Navy and enhance Somalia's maritime defense capabilities, which follows the training of soldiers by Turkey to establish a Somalian Army.

The present high in Turkey-Somalia relations can be traced to 2011 when humanitarian support transformed into strategic support – economic, infrastructural, and now including the military. The setting up of Turkey's largest overseas base at Mogadishu in October 2017, at the cost of USD 50 billion, serves two purposes: firstly, deepening the relationship through the training of Somalian soldiers; secondly, providing Ankara with a foothold in the IOR. While the main aim is presented as the building of Somali capability for exerting jurisdiction over its maritime zones to address illegal and illicit naval activities, Turkey has much to gain.

As per reports, Turkey will receive 30 percent of the revenue accrued from Somalia's Exclusive Economic Zone in return for the reconstruction, equipping, and training of the Somali Navy. This is seen as a justifiable cost by Somalia, which loses around USD 500 million to illegal fishing. Similarly, the oil and gas cooperation agreement would explore Somalia's oil and gas reserves, which are reported to be around 30 billion barrels and have remained largely untapped since the civil war of 1991 after the collapse of the government. The agreement authorizes Turkish state company TPAO to conduct exploration activities in three blocks within Somali maritime areas.

To abide by these agreements and help reconstruct Somalia, Erdogan is looking at a two-year mandate, subject to renewal,

to deploy the necessary forces in and off Somalia. Further, Ankara will likely deploy two frigates to protect the research vessel that will conduct a 3D seismic study in the three areas, 5,000 square kilometers each, "which had never been done before." This deployment, like the task to build a Somali navy, is enormous and will have long timelines as the survey and exploration progress.



Turkey's defense industry interests in IOR

Turkey is an emerging global arms exporter, and the IOR provides avenues for exporting Turkish defense equipment. In March 2024, Turkey sold drones to the Maldives for EEZ surveillance during the India-Maldives crisis. In July 2024, there were reports that Turkey had quietly banned the export of arms and defense-related items to India due to the cancellation of a shipbuilding project with an Indian shipyard. This move is also seen as in line with Turkey's support to Pakistan over Kashmir. However, it still seeks opportunities to grow its regional defense trade footprint.

Turkey's agreements with Somalia can also be viewed from this lens as they strengthen its political and military position in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region. Therefore, the IOR will see a growing Turkish naval presence, especially in the

EEZ of Somalia, with the potential to expand further. Due to predominantly maritime space limitations, Turkey is discussing establishing a missile and space rocket test site with Somalia. This move would serve Turkey's requirement to enhance its missile capabilities by constructing, testing, and proving longer-range missiles and its ambition to join the global space race. These missiles would also add value to Ankara's defense export inventory.

Implications for Regional Dynamics and India's Interests

China and Turkey have supported Pakistan against India in various international forums. While China is establishing a military presence in the region, especially in the maritime domain, Turkey has just started. This dual presence of China and Turkey in the IOR will pose complex challenges for India, as both nations could work together to undercut Indian interests. Turkey could replicate China's methodology of engaging India's neighbors, thereby restricting India's regional policy space. Though the U.S. could support India where China's influence is concerned, it may find itself restricted in giving the same support vis-à-vis Turkey as the latter is a NATO ally.

Turkey has also applied for membership in BRICS, and it is anticipated that Russia and China would support it. Turkey could leverage its membership in BRICS and its relations with Russia and China to balance its position as a NATO member and a reliable partner in all the frameworks it is a part of. Turkey could also leverage its relations with Russia to limit Russian support of India's position in the IOR. The Indian Ocean is an important maritime area for Turkey, and seeking strategic space in the IOR aligns with the 2015 Naval Forces Strategy and 2023 National Foreign Policy Document. Therefore, Turkey is consolidating its position, which could legitimize it as an IOR nation, another variable India must consider in its IOR security strategy.