

INDIA'S COLLABORATION WITH THE INDIAN OCEAN ISLANDS: A CRITICAL ELEMENT IN ITS GLOBAL SOUTH APPROACH

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By making the G-20, the G-21, India has left a legacy behind by walking the talk of reforming the institutions and structures that do not reflect the reality of the emerging global order. The spectacular ability of India to evolve a consensus among the G-20 members, at a time when the world is going through its roughest and toughest phase is a testament to India's 'Midas' touch on an issue that matters, and what matters to India is the Global South. Amongst several islands, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, that form the Global South, Comoros (the current chair of the African Union) and Mauritius were the guest members at the G-20 in 2023. Their active engagement was witnessed through their participation in various working groups and ministerial meetings. Thereby reiterating what Prime Minister Modi said in his opening statement at the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) III Summit in May 2023, "You are not small

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island states, but large ocean countries”.¹ This article is an attempt to answer three questions: first, why the focus is on island nations, in particular of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), amongst the host of countries and islands that form the Global South; second, it will explore India's engagement with the island nations; and, third, it will prospect how India can further enhance its stakes in the IOR, amidst increasing competition from China, and enlarging footprints of various other powers.

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE IOR AT THE FULCRUM OF THE 21 CENTURY

Forming a semi-circular arc, the IOR covers the Eastern Coast of Africa, West Asia, South Asia, parts of Southeast Asia, and some parts of Australia. Covering one-fifth of the water on the Earth's surface, the region is mapped with several points of congestion known as chokepoints, and straits and channels. Geography has further bestowed the region with several inhabited and uninhabitable islands that are playing a vital role in the resurgence of the vitality of the Indian Ocean. Being part of the larger Indo-Pacific region, the Indian Ocean too has become a playing field for several proximate and distant powers. But unlike its better half, the Pacific Ocean, where great power rivalry and competition is unfolding between an established power, the United States of America, and an emerging power, China, the streaks of competition in the Indian Ocean are between a residential player, India, and a proximate power, China. Although New Delhi and Beijing are separated by an ocean, continentally, they are neighbours and share land boundaries marked by war in 1962 and repeated skirmishes, including a violent clash in Galwan in 2021.

What is bringing China to the IOR and shaping its political, economic, diplomatic, institutional, and military reach is the importance of this ocean in its trade, technology, and investment. The dependence on the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and the need to secure them further, particularly after the opening

1. "PM's Opening Statement at the FIPIC III Summit", May 22, 2023, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-opening-statement-at-the-fipic-iii-summit/. Accessed on December 15, 2023.

of the Chinese economy in the last century has become one of the prerogatives driving the dragon. However, to consider only this as the driving factor is a folly in itself. Bringing its military vessels in the name of anti-piracy patrols since 2008, masking the spy vessels as research vessels, acquiring strategic places in the Indian Ocean, and challenging India's leadership and preeminent position in the Indian Ocean all speak volumes about China's underlined strategic interests and motives in the IOR. Being a traditional and residential player, India occupies nearly 40 per cent of the strategic waters of the Indian Ocean. To this end, the area also forms the primary area of responsibility for the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force, as mentioned in the 2015 Maritime Security Strategy and 2022 Doctrine of the Indian Air Force respectively. Geopolitically and geostrategically, the importance of the IOR is further enhanced by its return in the strategic mapping and policy-making of several regional and extra-regional players like Bangladesh, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, and others.

The geoeconomic importance of this ocean is not only due to the density of the global maritime trade that traverses over its surface but also due to the presence of resources beneath the waters. Looking at the IOR vertically, it can be divided into three parts: the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB), and the Bay of Bengal. The WIO is surrounded by the oil wells and gas reserves of West Asia and the Eastern Coast of Africa; the CIOB has the third largest reserves of polymetallic nodules, which are small golf ball-like shaped rounded accretions composed of minerals such as manganese, nickel, cobalt, copper, iron hydroxide and others. As nations are moving towards the goal zero emissions, these minerals form the backbone of several upcoming green technologies and high technology equipment. To the East, the Bay of Bengal that constitutes the Eastern Indian Ocean, is rich in several conventional and unconventional gas reserves such as ice-like hydrates that contain huge amounts of methane.² Further, overall, the IOR is highly rich in

2. "Special Issue of Indian Ocean Gas Hydrate Expedition", United States Geological Survey, January 27, 2020, <https://www.usgs.gov/news/national-news-release/special-issue-highlights-one-most-extensive-gas-hydrate-datasets-ever>. Accessed on January 10, 2024.

biodiversity and various species of marine resources. As the resources on the land are overexploited and are becoming scarce, the need to secure them from the sea will increase. This will consequentially drive more and more countries to the region and make it a chessboard for the major powers.

What further complicates the security architecture of the Indian Ocean is the presence and rise of several non-traditional challenges, such as piracy, sea-based terrorism, drug trafficking, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, forced migration, and, lastly, the reality of climate change. All this necessitates and requires that the Indian Ocean be secured and protected by its residents to ensure peace, prosperity, and development of the region. And that the security architecture be shaped and designed by the inhabitants. In this context, the island countries at large oceanic distances form the stepping stone to an opportunity to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, thereby keeping an eagle's eye on all the activities. However, before meeting the global need to secure the oceans, the local needs of the islands which have long been at the crossroads of colonialism, unequal economic quotient, and divided development must be met.

ISLANDS' IMPORTANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

India's ties with the island countries of the IOR date back to the colonial era, when several Indians from what constitute the different states of India today, were taken as slaves and indentured labourers, with the respective rise and fall of the different European powers in the Indian Ocean. Later, their generations settled, and eventually played an important role in the island states' societal, cultural, economic, and political development. Therefore, India enjoys civilisational and deep people-to-people ties with many island nations in the IOR.

The location of the islands as toll gates on the maritime highway bestows upon them certain advantages like extended coastlines, and, consequentially, prospects and possibilities for tourism, extended fishing grounds, and port activities. However, due to the limited capacity and capital to protect, preserve, and secure the large and porous maritime coastlines, they are largely dependent on external factors. To this end, the non-traditional challenges further

strain their security apparatuses. They also act as strategic locations for logistics and communication bases on the long distances of the ocean. For instance, since the end of World War II, after the withdrawal of the British from India and other countries of the IOR, the US has leased a base from the UK, Diego Garcia, on the Chagos archipelago of Mauritius. Countries with sizeable military reach, eye the islands as table-tops to project power and use them to extend their outreach and interoperability.³ Being located in the close vicinity of the key chokepoints, their location as the lighthouse in the vast ocean allows them to secure the global trade. What further enhances their significance is the presence of hydrocarbons and minerals in and around these islands.⁴ For example, Madagascar has the sixth largest reserve of rare earth elements in the form of Columbo tantalates.

Gone are the days when the vitality of the island nations was only for the collective votes in the United Nations General Assembly. Today, they have emerged as strategic grounds for forging cooperation and also define the competition among different countries. In this case, their balancing role in maximising their benefits from the India-China competition in the IOR has been repeatedly coming to light. For instance, it can be seen in the emerging mindset of Maldives under various presidents like the Yameen administration and the current Muizzu administration too where they have attempted to play the Chinese card with India and cancelled its projects, setting a deadline for the Indian military personnel (who have long helped to airlift Maldivians from different islands) to leave, and many more.

Having said that, it is also important to realise that many of the island states rank low on several international indices and demand fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and advances in areas such as renewable energy, disaster resilient infrastructure, and digital economy, juxtaposing with the areas in which India has made considerable advances. New Delhi has also earned considerable goodwill by being a staunch supporter

3. Radhey Tambi, "Locating Vanilla Islands in India-Africa Defence Cooperation", *Journal of Defense Studies*, vol 17, no 3, July-September 2023, pp. 326-343.

4. Ibid.

of strategic autonomy and respect for sovereignty. Further, India's larger engagement with the islands of the Indian Ocean that form the Global South can be seen and assessed under its diplomatic upswing, information networking, military and security cooperation, and widespread economic ties.

INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAND NATIONS

By organising two virtual Voice of the Global South Summits in 2023, the most difficult year of the global order wherein the Ukraine crisis was not seeing any end, the Gaza challenge had emerged, and economic slowdown was affecting many countries, India has played a seminal role in determining the regime's common future. Since its independence and even before, India has played a quintessential role by working with the island countries on the principles of consultation, cooperation, communication, and capacity building. Its role in the island countries of Maldives, and Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros (known as Vanilla Islands) in the IOR will be further sketched out in the following section.

Diplomacy

The gist of New Delhi's diplomatic depth can be read and reflected in the symbolism, substance, and style in each of the high-level visits to and from the island nation: be it Prime Minister Narendra Modi choosing Maldives as his first overseas destination after being re-elected in 2019 and addressing its Parliament (Majlis) or newly elected Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth of Mauritius choosing India for his first state visit in 2022. Modi also visited Seychelles and Mauritius during his first term in 2015, which was complemented by Vice-President Naidu visiting Comoros in 2019. The above visits have been further reciprocated by the exchanges at the foreign minister and defence minister levels from both sides.

To further build upon its island diplomacy, a landmark initiative was taken by bringing the major island states of the WIO and Southern Indian Ocean under the Indian Ocean Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This has brought all the initiatives towards the region under one umbrella. The steps taken through the diplomatic outreach have fructified and been implemented through

several channels such as creating a strong information network, and through economic grants and aid.

Information Networking

Access to, and 'excess' from, information forms the backbone to deal with any inter-state and non-traditional challenge in the IOR. In this context, the island states serve as an important ground for effective and efficient information. To this end, India has taken some significant steps in spanning out an information network in the region. In 2018, India launched the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) which collects information from various radars stationed in the island countries, and then fuses it with different centres in India like Mumbai, Kochi, and Gurugram. Though most of the islands are covered under the network, Comoros and Madagascar are still left out. But, at the same time, India opened its first listening post on foreign soil in Madagascar in 2008. In February 2023, India also inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Seychelles-based Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), which is one of the primary organisations dealing with security challenges in the WIO. Tapping on its information advancement, New Delhi has also taken steps to share this with its partners in the region like building a Centre for Geo-Information Application in Rural Development in Madagascar, that will empower its people to use geospatial technology in a host of rural development programmes and in particular, in agriculture.⁵

Military and Security Cooperation

The successful efforts by the Indian Navy in the recent piracy attacks in the Red Sea by saving a merchant vessel and its crew is a testament to the fact that India has been, and continues to be, the first responder in the IOR. The defence and security cooperation with the island countries covers a huge canvas like military training, military diplomacy, military assistance, and directly putting boots

5. President's Secretariat (India), "President of India Reached Madagascar on the First Ever Visit by an Indian President; Witnesses Signing of Bilateral Defence Agreement, Inaugurates Centre for Geo-Informatics Applications in Rural Development", Press Information Bureau, March 14, 2018, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1524489>. Accessed on January 10, 2024.

on the ground. Military training involves capacity building either in the home country or on foreign soil. According to the data provided by the MEA, India meets 70 per cent of the training demand of the Maldivian National Defence Forces.⁶ New Delhi also annually trains the Mauritian Police Forces. Lately, the INS *Trikand* and INS *Mumbai* provided training to the Comoros Coast Guard on handling small weapons, fire-fighting, and bridgeman ship.⁷

Military diplomacy involves port calls, visits, hydrographic surveys, and joint exercises, all of which help in strengthening bilateral ties and promoting interoperability. To name a few: Exercise Lamitiye with Seychelles, Ekuverin and Dosthi with Maldives, PASSEX with Madagascar, Operation Vanilla by the Indian Navy and Air Force after the devastation caused by Cyclone Diane, and others. Tectonically, the Indian Ocean is quite young and morphologically very complex. However, it has been surveyed only at the reconnaissance level. Hydrographic surveys are required to undertake offshore or onshore activities, be it tourism, finding fertile fishing grounds, port design, cable laying operation, or even mineral exploration. Some of the notable efforts by India in this direction, some of which were also internationally accepted⁸ include presenting a navigation chart of Port Victoria to Seychelles in 2022.

Military assistance means engaging in defence transfers, equipment, and technology. To ensure that the island countries engage in efficacious surveillance and protect their large coastlines, India has gifted them many patrol vessels and warships. To name some, India gifted its first indigenously built warship to Mauritius in 2013 and patrol vessels such as the *Topaz*, *Constant*, *Hermes*, and *Zoroaster* to Seychelles. Apart from engaging in defence transfers, India also plays a significant role in the maintenance of the defence assets of the island nations. Such as the INS *Kesari* extended technical

6. "India-Maldives Bilateral Relations", Ministry of External Affairs (India), https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Maldives.pdf. Accessed on January 12, 2024.

7. "Indian Naval Ships at Moroni, Comoros Islands", Indian Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-naval-ships-moroni-comoros-islands>. Accessed on January 12, 2024.

8. Ministry of Defence (India), "CNS Visit to Seychelles", Press Information Bureau, April 23, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1819259>. Accessed on January 14, 2024.

assistance in repairing a grounded vessel of the Comorian Coast Guard.⁹ Direct deployment means the stationing of forces on the ground. At the request of the Maldivians in 1988, India sent its forces to prevent a coup and restore peace in the country.

Additionally, India has played a pioneering role in formulating the Colombo Security Conclave, a trilateral security initiative among India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. Its full membership has further been extended to Mauritius, and Seychelles has become an observer, along with Bangladesh. Working on the five important issues, the grouping focusses on:

- Maritime safety and security.
- Countering terrorism and radicalisation.
- Combatting trafficking and transnational organised crime.
- Cyber security, protection of critical infrastructure and technology.
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).¹⁰

A close analysis at the above areas of cooperation reflects the far-sightedness of the members to enhance and strengthen the security architecture of the IOR.

Economic Cooperation

Though India may not be engaging in gigantic infrastructure projects like those of the Chinese under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in an Indian way, through its High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) India is uplifting and empowering the lives of millions of people. HICDPs are community oriented projects that are based on the needs and wants of the people. To mention a few, they include creating tourism zones, drug detoxification centres, fish processing units, food processing projects, and others. Economic cooperation includes grants, aid, and assistance through Lines of

9. Embassy of India (Antananarivo), "Indian Naval Ship Kesari arrived at the Port of Moroni, Comoros.", January 7, 2022, https://www.eoiantananarivo.gov.in/news_letter_detail/?id=92. Accessed on January 14, 2024.

10. Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), "Joint Press Statement of the 5th NSA Level Meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave held on 09 – 10 March 2022, in Maldives", March 10, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34943/Joint_Press_Statement_of_the_5th_NSA_Level_Meeting_of_the_Colombo_Security_Conclave_held_on_09__10_March_2022_in_Maldives. Accessed on January 10, 2024.

Credit (LOCs). In this case, India has given financial assistance packages to Mauritius and Maldives and an LOC to increase the productivity of rice cultivation and increase farm mechanisation in Madagascar.

WHAT INDIA MUST DO FURTHER TO ENHANCE ITS STAKES IN THE IOR

The vitality of the Indian Ocean, in the larger Indo-Pacific region, will continue to grow and shape the order of things to come as more and more countries get geopolitically, geoeconomically, and geostrategically involved in the region. However, for India to continue sitting in the driver's seat and shape the regional security architecture of the IOR, it needs to shift gears much faster than before. In this context, India is likely to face major challenges in the maritime space from its continental neighbour, China, which is enlarging its footprints through the gargantuan project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There is no denying the fact that New Delhi welcomes any kind of development project that can uplift the region and its people. But development at what cost? Not the cost which goes beyond the absorbing capacity of the recipient nations. As seen in the case of Sri Lanka where the Hambantota port went out of the paying capacity of the Lankans, and then was leased out to Beijing for 99 years.

China is the only country to have an embassy in all the Indian Ocean islands and is making its inroads by engaging in defence partnerships, opening Confucius Institutes, and undertaking colossal infrastructure projects like building roads, bridges, housing schemes, ports, and airports. However, India does not need to compete with any country, and can simultaneously create its own niche in a manner that is demand driven, sustainable, and inclusive.

First and foremost, India must complete its already launched HICDPs, that are closest to the people and based on the priorities of the common man. They can empower people and improve the quality of their lives. Additionally, these projects are also cost-effective and within the paying capacity of the small island nations. Further, India must identify newer areas of cooperation such as financial technology, cyber security, digitisation, renewable energy,

etc. that can make the island nations' journey to accomplish SDGs easier and smoother. Not only bilaterally, but also being one of the important pillars of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), India must drive an 'Indo' focus with the other members that is not limited to India, but covers the wider IOR. One such area could be the laying down, operation, and maintenance of subsea cables in the Indian Ocean. Currently, India produces nearly double the amount of subsea cables that are used in the country, while the US and Japan have been the traditional players in their operation and maintenance since the end of World War II.¹¹ At the same time, Australia which shares the largest coastline and has shown its interest in the IOR, as reflected in its policy paper like Australia's Defence Strategic Review 2023, can be pulled in. The combined synergy of all the players must be utilised in the right direction to ensure the region remains free, open, and inclusive.

Considered a preferred security partner and primary enabler in the region, India's ties with the island countries must go beyond the ballot. Using its sound democratic credentials, India must be able to exploit back channel diplomacy and build cordial ties with parties across the spectrum in all the island nations of the Indian Ocean. This will allow India to build a resistance mechanism against the push and pull of the great powers in the times to come.¹² To this end, India must forge institutional engagements that have the ability to withstand uncertainties and create relative certainties. All this will allow India to strengthen its ties with the islands that are not only part of the Global South but also lie to its south and are quintessential in India's stature of an emerging power.

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11. Radhey Tambi and Aishwarya Acharya, "Finding a Goldilocks Moment for India in the U.S.-China Subsea Cables Race", *The Diplomat*, July 26, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/finding-a-goldilocks-moment-for-india-in-the-u-s-china-subsea-cables-race/>. Accessed on January 11, 2024.
 12. Radhey Tambi, "India-Maldives Ties: Beyond the Ballot", *In Focus*, Centre for Air Power Studies, October 20, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/india-maldives-ties-beyond-the-ballot/>. Accessed on January 10, 2024.