

Locating Indian Ocean Island States in India's Foreign Policy

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The six Indian Ocean island states are located near key waterways, and are emerging as important actors in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean.

For India, outreach towards these island states is emerging as a key element of its Indian Ocean strategy. In fact, India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) Vision was launched in Mauritius in 2015. In the context of China's growing strategic and economic presence in the region, it is imperative for India to deepen its engagements with the smaller yet strategically important island states of the Indian Ocean. This paper locates the Indian Ocean island states in India's foreign policy broadly, and its maritime strategy specifically.

In May 2020, while the world was in the midst of an unprecedented health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian Navy embarked on a mission to deliver much-needed food and medical assistance to the small island states of the Indian Ocean as part of its "Mission Sagar" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020). The Indian Navy's *INS Kesari* visited the Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles, and Comoros in a span of 55 days, and travelled 7,500 nautical miles. The assistance included "supplies of essential food items, medicines, Ayurvedic medicines" (ibid). Moreover, medical assistance teams were deployed in Mauritius and Comoros. Interestingly, the press release of India's Ministry of External Affairs MEA referred to these island states in the Indian Ocean as "our maritime neighbours" (ibid).

The decision to provide assistance to the Indian Ocean Island states while the country was in the grip of a nation-wide, crippling lockdown and the extraordinarily difficult health crisis was significant for three reasons: first, it

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underlined India's role as a pre-eminent Indian Ocean power, with an ability to respond to the crises in the quickest possible time despite the pressures of its own domestic requirements; second, by supplying medical and food assistance to these countries, India underscored the growing geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Island states in its foreign policy strategy; and finally, India's characterisation of island states of the Indian Ocean as part of its maritime neighbourhood signalled the expanded strategic horizons of India's foreign policy discourse.

The launch of Mission Sagar and its strategic importance is part of a broader trend in India's evolving strategic orientation towards the Indian Ocean. In this context, the present essay attempts to locate the island states in India's foreign policy towards the Indian Ocean. The essay takes into account India's engagement with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros. French island territories in the Indian Ocean, such as Réunion and Mayotte, are also critical in the context of strengthening the Indo-French strategic partnership, and its function to project French influence in the region. The essay argues that, being a resident naval power of the Indian Ocean, India has no option but to actively engage with these smaller states - despite the rapidly shifting currents in their domestic politics - and pay greater attention to these states for protecting its vital interests.

The essay begins by outlining the strategic importance of the island states in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. Subsequently, it considers India's engagement with these states by arranging them into four groups, based on the geographic location, history of ties with India, and the priority accorded by India's policymakers to these island states. Sri Lanka and the Maldives form the first group; Seychelles and Mauritius are part of the second group; and Madagascar and Comoros fall in the third group. Finally, the Réunion and other French territories in the Indian Ocean are considered together as the fourth group. The growing economic and military presence of China in the Indian Ocean island states, and the competition for influence between India and China is an underlying theme in the essay.

The Island States in the Indian Ocean and the Evolving Geopolitics

Compared with the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, the Indian Ocean has relatively few islands. Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world, is located in the Indian Ocean. There are several smaller yet strategically important islands in the Indian Ocean, like Sri Lanka and Socotra Yemen. France, Britain, and Australia control many smaller islands in the Indian Ocean (Lintner, 2019).

It helps them to extend their geopolitical reach, establish a strategic presence as well as enlarge their Exclusive Economic Zones or EEZs. In fact, France and Australia are maritime neighbours not just in the South Pacific but in the Indian Ocean as well. For India, apart from its peninsular geography jutting out into the Indian Ocean, the Lakshadweep archipelago in the Arabian Sea, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, served as the strategic launch pad for the geopolitics of the Western and Eastern Indian Oceans, respectively.

In the evolving geopolitics, the strategic importance of island states has gone up significantly. The security presence in the form of military bases, listening posts, naval monitoring stations, and/or logistics support facilities enhances the ability of the naval forces to operate in the Indian Ocean. It helps in monitoring the sea lanes, which are crucial for global energy and economic trade, passing through the Indian Ocean as well. As the region is emerging as a key fulcrum of international politics in the 21 century, major extra-regional powers are making active efforts to gain a foothold in the Indian Ocean. In this context, the role and position of smaller yet strategically important island states are critical.

In the last decade, India and China have made efforts, but have failed to establish military bases in Seychelles (Lintner, 2019, pp. 165-167). The USA is making efforts to continue its unhindered access to the military base of the Diego Garcia which is located in the contested Chagos archipelago. Meanwhile, the competition between major powers for expanding their strategic influence and security presence has endowed these smaller states with newfound agency and bargaining power. They can leverage their strategically critical locations, play one player off against the other, and maximise their gains. Seychelles has managed to play this game, so far, exceptionally well.

The great power politics in the Indian Ocean is also generating new vulnerabilities for the island states. These states are facing pull and push pressures from major players who are interested in establishing a foothold. As a result, major powers are paying closer attention to the domestic politics of smaller island states. For example, the elections and the change of guard in Seychelles in 2020 was watched with much interest in India. The new friendships, the availability of cheap loans free of conditionalities (such as about respect for human rights and democratic norms), and closer economic and infrastructure ties are not necessarily helpful in advancing the domestic developmental requirements of these states. The building of a deep-water port at Hambantota in Sri Lanka and its eventual handover to a Chinese company, in a debt for equity swap, for a 99-year lease has demonstrated this

lesson rather sharply (Abi-Habib, 2018). The engagement with major powers is arming rulers in power with technological and other kinds of support that will be useful in manipulating domestic politics and electoral processes. For example, reportedly, Russian operatives were spotted on the eve of elections in Madagascar in 2018 in an attempt to influence the election results (Schwartz & Borgia, 2019).

In this context of the increasing presence of major powers, and the sharpening of strategic rivalries, India's engagement with the island states of the Indian Ocean is taking shape. The reverberations of India's rise as an economic and military, especially naval, power is felt across the region. India has emerged as a net security provider in the region. Indeed, India brands itself as the "preferred security partner" for the Indian Ocean states (Kaushik, 2021). The smaller island states have looked up to India for support. They have sought India's help time and again, be it the water emergency in the Maldives or the relief efforts in the wake of a cyclone in Madagascar. Moreover, India considers these Indian Ocean Island states as part of its sphere of influence (Brewster, *An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?*, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand and locate the Indian Ocean Island states in India's foreign policy.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives

Among the island states, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, located in the North-Central Indian Ocean along the sea lanes which connect West Asia with East Asia, are geographically closest to the Indian mainland. Along with India, these two states are members of the South Asian regional cooperative institution known as the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). By virtue of their geographic location, they are part of India's South Asia policy known as "Neighbourhood First" as well as of the Indian Ocean strategy of "Security and Growth for all in the Region" (SAGAR). Time and again, India has planned high-level visits to these island states keeping these policy approaches in mind (Basu, 2019). India's engagement with these two states has been much more intense as compared with other islands in the Indian Ocean. They have been major recipients of India's developmental assistance as well. Thus, the geographic and cultural proximity with India made it a key player in the domestic politics of Sri Lanka. In the last decade, the growing Chinese presence and the anti-India politics of President Abdullah Yameen (2013-2018) have been key factors in shaping the Maldivian engagement with India.

In the 1980s, India's engagement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives witnessed a strong security dimension. Sri Lanka was struggling with the Tamil insurgency, launched by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in its northern regions. India launched a military mission during 1987-1989, and deployed troops in Sri Lanka. The Indian Army ended up fighting the Tamil insurgents, and got embroiled in the complex dynamics between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities in Sri Lanka. Since then, much has been written about the complicated politics surrounding Sri Lanka's civil war, and India's role in it. The point here is to underline the security-driven engagement of India with Sri Lanka. In 1988, mercenaries from Sri Lanka attempted a coup in Maldives, and India promptly sent its troops and naval forces to thwart the plans of the mercenaries (Singh, 2017). The interventions in Sri Lanka and the Maldives were seen as the operationalisation of India's Monroe Doctrine of regional primacy (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008, p. 1000). The politico-military efforts in Sri Lanka and Maldives underlined India's role as a pre-eminent regional power (ibid).

The decades of the 1990s and 2000s saw a steady rise of India as a military and economic power (ibid). Throughout these decades, India remained a steadfast security partner for the Maldives. India supplied weapons and training to the Maldivian armed forces, and the Indian Navy helped in securing Maldivian waters. Reportedly, India was granted access to Gan Island, which is the southernmost Maldivian island and hosts a British-era airstrip. India sought to base its Dornier aircraft and naval helicopters at Gan (Brewster, *An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?*, 2010).

India was making a difficult balancing act between the imperatives of the domestic politics in the state of Tamil Nadu and foreign policy priorities. However, India signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Sri Lanka in 1998, and continued to provide diplomatic and developmental support (Menon, 2016). In the late 2000s, politics in Sri Lanka and the Maldives underwent a significant change. The Maldives transitioned to democracy in 2008, and Mohammad Nasheed became the President (McKie, 2009). In 2009, the Sri Lankan civil war ended with a defeat of the Tamil insurgents. The political change in these two countries also brought in its own set of challenges for India.

The decade of 2010s proved to be much more tumultuous and unstable than the previous decades. The rise of China as a major power, willing to engage with the Indian Ocean region much more vigorously and challenge India's influence, emerged as a key factor in shaping the trajectory of the

geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. Freed from the pressure of insurgency, Sri Lanka embarked on a path of Sinhalese majoritarian politics. It continued to deepen its ties with China. Chinese military assistance during the civil war, and the political and economic support after 2009 to deflect the international pressure for an inquiry into the alleged human rights abuses by the Sri Lankan military, were crucial for Sri Lanka (Menon, 2016).

During this period, the Chinese economic and infrastructure footprint in Sri Lanka went up considerably. In fact, Sri Lanka's President, Mahinda Rajapakse, who was at the helm of Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2015, had built his political machine on Chinese support. Subsequently, President Maithripala Sirisena, who was in power from 2015 till 2020, could not untangle the island nation from China's formidable economic and infrastructure presence. By some estimates, Sri Lanka has received US\$ 12 billion of Chinese investments between 2006 and 2019 (Wignaraja, Panditaratne, Kannangara, & Hundlani, 2020). Meanwhile, in 2012, the Maldives witnessed a coup, and pro-India Nasheed was unseated. Therefore, during 2012-15, India had to deal with the Maldives and Sri Lanka whose regimes were markedly frosty and were welcoming greater Chinese presence to balance India.

In 2014, a Chinese nuclear submarine docked in Sri Lanka. For long, India considered the Indian Ocean as India's Ocean, and therefore, the presence of a Chinese nuclear submarine in Sri Lanka was an extremely provocative proposition. Indian reaction was expectedly severe (Bagchi, 2021). The visit of the nuclear submarine and the strengthening China-Sri Lanka ties magnified India's concerns about increased Chinese presence, especially in the domain of security, in its own backyard.

Meanwhile, under the new regime, Chinese influence in the Maldives, including its presence in the infrastructure and tourism sectors, was going up to the extent that Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the tiny island nation in 2014. It was the first visit by any Chinese President to the Maldives (Lintner, 2019, pp. 177-178). As the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean was steadily growing in India's policy calculations, the rising Chinese security presence in its maritime neighbourhood had become a reality. The close ties of Sri Lanka and the Maldives with China presented a difficult challenge. In India's strategic discourse, Sri Lanka was also seen as an integral part of China's so-called "String of Pearls" strategy to encircle India by developing ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Khurana, 2008).

In 2015, Mahinda Rajapakse lost the elections, and the new government took power in Sri Lanka. Sensing the opportunity, India's Prime Minister

Narendra Modi visited three Indian Ocean Island states: Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). It was a strong signal that India was changing its approach to the Indian Ocean. Island states would be considered together owing to their strategic importance. The Maldives was conspicuous by its absence (Chaudhury, 2015). India was concerned about the extent of Chinese influence in the Maldives, and also about the treatment meted out to the Maldivian opposition by the regime of Abdullah Yameen. However, Indo-Maldivian cooperation on security matters continued to some extent. Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, the new regime of Maithripala Sirisena realised that the country was deep in Chinese debt, and could not repay loans. Therefore, in 2017, it was forced to hand over the strategically located southern port of Hambantota to China in a debt for equity deal. Since then, Hambantota has been cited as an example of China's "debt-trap diplomacy" (Lintner, 2019, pp. 26-28). Fears have been expressed that many other smaller nations with high debt to China might have to go the same way.

Although India took over the airport at Hambantota, the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka and the foothold at Hambantota have accentuated India's security concerns (Brewster, 2018). Reportedly, Maldives has leased the islet of Feydhoo Finolhu to China. Satellite imagery has shown landfill and dredging works being done in the islet (Kannan, 2020). The Maldives also signed an FTA with China. In 2017, Chinese naval vessels visited the Maldives, and signalled their intention of increasing its military footprint (Ramachandran, 2018). Throughout 2017-18, Maldives' former President Nasheed was urging India to take active measures against the regime of Yameen. Finally, in the elections, Yameen lost, and pro-India Ibrahim Solih was elected. India heaved a sigh of relief. Since then, Maldives has moved much closer to India, and diplomatic and defence cooperation is intensifying (Moorthy & Revi, 2021). India has also taken decisive steps to assist the Maldivian regime. The USA, too, signed a framework agreement for defence cooperation with the Maldives. The USA and Japan have been making efforts to engage with the Maldives to check Chinese influence.

Meanwhile, as the geopolitics of Sri Lanka and the Maldives was heating up with an interplay of domestic politics and Chinese presence, in January 2016 India set up an Indian Ocean division in the MEA to coordinate and synchronize efforts in the Indian Ocean region. The division includes four island states of the Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles. The trilateral maritime security cooperation mechanism between India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka - which was halted in 2014 and was revived in 2020 - is also included in the division's ambit (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016).

In Sri Lanka, the Sirisena government lost power in 2020, and Gotabaya Rajapakse is now President, with Mahinda Rajapakse as Prime Minister. The new government has announced that, unlike in the past, it will be sensitive towards India's security interests (Times of India, 2020). However, Chinese presence in Sri Lanka is a structural reality. Sri Lanka's economic difficulties have continued under the Rajapakse regime. Sri Lanka sought India's assistance in alleviating economic difficulties, especially the currency swap arrangement, while it allowed domestic politics to scuttle the proposed investment from India and Japan in Colombo's East Container Terminal (ECT) project. The project had a strategic significance in India and Japan's calculations. The politics around ECT underscores the complexity of Sri Lankan politics as well as raises questions over its reliability as a strategic partner.

In 2021, taking the trilateral security cooperation a step forward, deputy National Security Advisors (NSA) from India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka met. They agreed to deepen cooperation in four areas: marine security, cyber security, human trafficking, and counter-terrorism. The countries also decided to deepen intelligence cooperation (Srinivasan, 2021). However, in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, just like other smaller South Asian countries, there is an important domestic constituency that is opposed to closer ties with India. Therefore, the strategic relationship and the defence partnership, especially the visibility of the military ties, will continue to face pressures from domestic politics. India has no option but to deal with this reality. Strategic partners in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as the Quad) will help in boosting India's efforts, and in limiting China's influence. The role of Japan and the USA will be critical in this regard.

Mauritius and Seychelles

In the context of China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, and India's expanding strategic footprint, including the maritime dimensions of its foreign policy, Seychelles and Mauritius have faced intense pressure of the India-China rivalry. When the Indian Ocean division of MEA was formed, Mauritius and Seychelles were included in it. The inclusion was an implicit acknowledgment of the growing geopolitical importance of Seychelles and Mauritius in India's Indian Ocean matrix. It signalled the emergence and willingness of adopting an integrated approach towards the four most important Indian Ocean states for India's strategic interests. It was no surprise that India's approach to SAGAR was unveiled in Port Louis in Mauritius in March 2015.

The Prime Minister's remarks while handing over the Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda are considered as the enunciation of India's SAGAR vision. India asserted that the "Indian Ocean Region is at the top of our policy priorities. Our vision for Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region; and, to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015). The Prime Minister promised to "do everything to safeguard [India's] mainland and islands and defend [its] interests. Equally, [it] will work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers ... all [its people] to the shores of prosperity" (ibid). Moreover, India assured its Indian Ocean partners that it "will deepen [its] economic and security cooperation with [its] friends in the region, especially [its] maritime neighbours and island states. [It] will also continue to build [its] maritime security capacities and [its] economic strength" (ibid).

While speaking about the India-Mauritius relationship, the Prime Minister added that "our partnership with Mauritius is among our strongest maritime relationships in the world" (ibid). In fact, "our partnership will grow. We will together build our capabilities. We will also train and patrol the seas together. But, the foundation of this partnership is larger. It is our shared values and a common vision" (ibid). The presence of the Indian Diaspora and deep cultural as well as economic links, bind Mauritius with India. For Seychelles too, India is a close strategic partner. However, as China has begun expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean, they have sensed an opportunity to benefit by engaging with China. Seychelles and Mauritius have managed to deftly play India against China.

The location of these two states along the critical sea lanes in the Western Indian Ocean at the crossroads of India, West Asia, and Africa heightens the geopolitical importance of both Mauritius and Seychelles. The weight of India's military and economic capabilities has been felt in these islands. In the 1980s, when the Left-leaning Seychellois government was under threat from the rebels, it sought India's help. India dispatched the naval warship INS Vindhyagiri to signal its support to the incumbent government (Brewster & Rae, 2011). Furthermore, India established the Seychelles Defence Academy in 1989 (ibid). India supported the Mauritian government to thwart the coup attempt in the 1980s as well (Hall, 2019). If the Indian efforts in Maldives and Sri Lanka are considered along with these, they complete a picture of an evolving, activist Indian policy in the Indian Ocean in the 1980s. In the wake of the debacle of intervention in Sri Lanka and domestic economic and political troubles in the 1990s, India scaled back its role in the Indian Ocean (Brewster

& Rae, 2011). However, it began to re-establish its security role in the Indian Ocean at the turn of the century.

India and Seychelles have built an "elaborate architecture of defence and security cooperation" which "has deepened over the years" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). In 2005, when the Seychelles Coast Guard needed a fast attack boat for patrolling, India promptly approved the request by gifting INS Tarmugli to Seychelles. The naval vessel was in service when India decided to gift it to Seychelles, thus indicating the urgency of response as well as anxiety regarding China's growing profile in the region (Mohan, 2009). Over the years, India has continued this trend of gifting defence assets to Seychelles. India gifted another patrol boat in 2014, and a Fast Interceptor Boat C-405 in 2016. Two Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft were gifted in 2013 and 2018, respectively (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). India has gifted and installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in the Seychelles. These strategic assets have built up the overall capability of Seychelles (*ibid*). India has also conducted hydrographic surveys for Seychelles. Besides, the training of police and military personnel as well as joint exercises and regular naval visits between the Indian and the Seychelles armed forces have continued (*ibid*).

In the case of Mauritius, India is considered as the closest external partner. Former Mauritian Prime Minister, Paul Berenger, once described the India-Mauritius relationship as "umbilical and sacred". Even another Prime Minister, Anerood Jugnauth, considers ties with India in terms of "blood relations" (Brewster, 2010). Therefore, for Mauritius, India remains a special strategic partner. India supports Mauritius on the contentious issue of the Chagos archipelago (PTI, 2018). Mauritius claims the Chagos archipelago which houses the USA's formidable forward military base of Diego Garcia. The issue involves Britain as well because the Chagos islands are a part of British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), and Britain had leased it to the USA. Mauritius took this issue to the International Court of Justice ICJ, and won the case. However, the diplomatic standoff between the three parties is yet to be resolved.

In security matters, Mauritius has historically been supported by India. The Indian navy has launched patrols for maritime security in Mauritian waters (Brewster, 2010). India has also gifted patrol vessels, like the OPV Barracuda, to Mauritius. India trains the civilian and military personnel of Mauritius through its scholarship program. In February 2021, during the visit of External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, to Mauritius, India signed an agreement with Mauritius to provide Advanced Light Helicopter Dhruv and Dornier aircraft on lease for

two years. India also announced a US\$ 100 million line of credit for defence-related purchases to Mauritius (Roche, 2021).

The issue of establishing a military base at Seychelles and Mauritius has often been in the news and in discussions for the last few years. The strategically critical location of these two states increases their attractiveness for the establishment of a base. India has been accused of having plans to establish bases on the Agalega Island in Mauritius, and on the Assumption Island in Seychelles. Reportedly, India is in talks with the Mauritian government to establish a base. The possibility of an Indian military base has been in discussion since at least 2006-07 (Brewster, 2010; Mohan, 2009). In 2021, it was revealed by using satellite imagery, that the construction of a naval jetty, and an airstrip capable of handling P-8I maritime patrol aircraft is underway on Agalega (Bashfield, 2021). As of now, ambiguity still remains regarding the existence of an Indian military base in Mauritius; however, the Mauritian government has vehemently denied this.

India signed an agreement with Seychelles in 2015 to develop infrastructure facilities on Assumption Island (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). It was seen as a blue print for developing military infrastructure to facilitate the expansion of India's defence-related footprint and strategic reach. However, the agreement soon got caught up in the domestic politics of Seychelles. The Opposition in Seychelles refused to support the agreement which enjoyed a majority in parliament. India tried to persuade Seychelles again in 2018, but failed. Meanwhile, China made efforts to build a forward operating base in Seychelles in 2011. The ostensible reason was to support China's anti-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean. Just like India, China's efforts to establish a base in Seychelles also failed (Lintner, 2019, pp. 165-168).

China recently signed an FTA with Mauritius. It made Mauritius the first African state to sign an FTA with China. The FTA will help Mauritius to emerge as a gateway of Chinese investments in Africa, and is likely to result in further increasing Chinese influence in Mauritius (Johnston & Lanteigne, 2021). For these smaller states, dependent on the tourism, the steadily increasing flow of Chinese tourists is a major attraction. There is a danger of China 'weaponizing' tourism to influence the policies of these island states. China encourages tourism with friendly countries, and discourages it when it wants to punish a nation (Lintner, 2019, pp. 165-166). While Seychelles and Mauritius look to India for immediate security assistance, diplomatic support, developmental cooperation, and disaster relief efforts, China remains an attractive economic and infrastructure partner. Therefore, it is clear that

Seychelles and Mauritius would like to keep their options open. They are likely to continue to play their diplomatic balancing act, and turn the India-China rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean to their own advantage.

Comoros and Madagascar

For long, Comoros and Madagascar were seen as part of the French sphere of influence in the Southwest Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy had maintained a regular presence in the Mozambique Channel, and the waters off the coast of East Africa. It had provided maritime security to the Mozambican capital Maputo in 2003 and 2004 as it was hosting the African Union (AU) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) summit meetings (Saran & Singh, 2018). Subsequently, despite the increasing strategic importance of the Western Indian Ocean, India took some time to engage these two states. However, in the last few years, high level engagement from India to these two key "Vanilla Island states" is being projected as a necessary corrective step.

In 2007, India activated its first listening post on the foreign soil in Northern Madagascar (Pubby, 2007). A report in *The Indian Express* mentioned that, a key monitoring station "complete with radars and surveillance gear to intercept maritime communication, was quietly made operational earlier this month as part of Indian Navy's strategy to protect the country's sea lanes of commerce" (ibid). The same report quoted an official saying that, "with berthing rights in Oman and monitoring stations in Madagascar, Mauritius, Kochi and Mumbai, the navy will effectively box in the region to protect sea lanes right from Mozambique and the Cape of Good Hope to the Gulf of Oman" (ibid).

As the rising Chinese presence, especially in the resource-rich Madagascar, emerges as a significant strategic development, India has been forced to pay greater diplomatic attention to these two states. In March 2018, India's President, Ramnath Kovind, visited Madagascar as part of his two-nation tour to the Western Indian Ocean (Saran & Singh, 2018). Furthermore, in October 2019, Vice President, Venkaiah Naidu, paid a visit to Comoros (Sibal, 2019). These two visits managed to underscore the geopolitical imperatives of engaging with the Southwest Indian Ocean region. It also helped that India and France are close strategic partners. As a result, the Indian engagement of Comoros and Madagascar is not directed to undercut the French influence. If anything, it would help India and France to balance the growing Chinese interest in the region together. Maintaining stability, balance of power, and maritime security in the region is a shared interest for India and France.

India has signed an agreement for defence cooperation with Comoros. It has provided a grant of US\$ 2 million to Comoros for interceptor boats. Moreover, India has offered a line of credit worth US\$ 20 million for the procurement of boats (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Two defence officials from Comoros participated in the Goa Maritime Symposium (ibid). India and Madagascar have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for defence cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Bilateral cooperation projects in the defence sector are on the cards. In 2021, Indian Navy's Mobile Training team was deployed to Madagascar for training officers. Moreover, India and Madagascar undertook joint patrolling of Malagasy EEZ for the first time (ibid). India's regular and quick humanitarian assistance to Madagascar in the form of food and medical supplies is also playing a role in deepening India-Madagascar relations (Gurjar, 2020).

India's acceptance as a dialogue partner in the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), an organisation of five French-speaking states in the Southwest Indian Ocean, is an important development (The Wire, 2020). The IOC has Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, Mauritius and France (through Réunion) as its members, which opens up possibilities of cooperation in a diplomatic forum dedicated to regional affairs. In fact, the IOC is the only regional organisation in the Western Indian Ocean. Madagascar is an observer in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an India-led initiative for regional security in the Indian Ocean. Comoros and Madagascar could be included as the full members of IONS. The latest IONS summit was hosted by France. The French Indian Ocean territories, such as Réunion and Mayotte, establish France as an Indian Ocean power. As the Indo-French strategic cooperation is deepening, the role of French Indian Ocean territories is assuming significance.

French Indian Ocean Territories

France maintains an expansive presence in the Southwest Indian Ocean. More than a million French citizens live in the region (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021). France believes that Réunion and Mayotte, along with the French Southern and Antarctic lands, contribute to the region's vitality (ibid). French presence in the Indian Ocean is considered central to "France's action in the Indo-Pacific" (ibid). The French EEZ in the Indian Ocean "accounts for more than 10% of the total surface of that ocean, and 20% of France's total EEZ" (ibid). Moreover, the "French Armed Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI) provide a permanent military presence based in

La Réunion and Mayotte, and conduct sovereignty and regional cooperation missions" (ibid).

In 2019, it was revealed that India would deploy a naval aircraft at France's Réunion Island, thus signalling the strengthening of the Indo-French strategic partnership (Vavasseur, 2020). India's consulate at Réunion, functioning since 1986, also facilitates closer collaboration between the two strategic partners. In February 2020, India and France jointly conducted maritime patrols from the Réunion. France has deployed a liaison officer at the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean region IFC-IOR as well (Peri, 2020). India and France unveiled a Joint Strategic Vision for the Indian Ocean in 2018, and have also signed a logistics support agreement (The Wire, 2019). Access to the French bases such as Réunion would boost the Indian Navy's capabilities to operate longer in the region. It would increase the interoperability between Indian and French forces. French President Emmanuel Macron has said that for India and France, the "common security agenda in the region is an agenda of maritime surveillance, protection of our marine areas, construction of a joint agenda to avoid any form of hegemony or intrusion" (ibid). The close strategic partnership between India and France will be a key factor to ensure security and stability in the Indian Ocean region.

Concluding Remarks

The Indian Ocean Island states are attaining increasing strategic importance due to the geopolitical rivalries that are being played out in the region. These rivalries are generating new opportunities as well as pressures for these smaller states. India, being a resident naval power, is a major player in the Indian Ocean. The reverberations of India's growing economic and military power are felt across the region. These island states look up to India for security and developmental assistance. However, they try to balance the Indian presence by engaging with other powers like China. India's engagement with Indian Ocean Island states is being reshaped in the context of India-China rivalry.

Sri Lanka and Maldives are at the crossroads of India's South Asia policy and Indian Ocean strategy. India is a major factor in their domestic politics. In the 1980s, India had intervened militarily in these countries. In the last few years, these two states have been engaging with China, and India remains anxious about the extent of Chinese influence there. Growing Chinese presence in Sri Lanka and Maldives directly impacts India's security calculations. The handover of the port of Hambantota in a debt for equity swap deal, and the accumulation of Chinese debt in these countries is being watched warily by

India. The docking of a Chinese nuclear submarine in Sri Lanka, and the scrapping of the deal for East Container Terminal, developed by India and Japan, raise serious questions about Sri Lanka's reliability as a strategic partner willing to respect India's sensitivities.

Seychelles and Mauritius are at the centre of strategic rivalries between India and China. Mauritius has historically been closer to India, and there are speculations about the upcoming Indian military base in Mauritius. Seychelles is a more difficult partner from India's point of view, although India is a close security partner for Seychelles as well. India's agreement to develop facilities on Assumption Island has been subjected to domestic politics of Seychelles. India has not been able to persuade the Seychellois political elite to allow it to establish this military base. Mauritius and Seychelles have also been recipients of India's economic and security assistance. India has gifted strategic assets - like maritime patrol aircraft and naval vessels - to them. However, China remains a close economic and infrastructure partner for these two states.

Comoros and Madagascar have emerged as key players in India's Indian Ocean engagement. India has made efforts to deepen security cooperation through high-level visits to these states. Close strategic ties between India and France are helping India to expand its influence in the Southwest Indian Ocean. India has deployed maritime patrol aircraft, and also launched joint patrols from the French Indian Ocean territory of Réunion. The overall effect of India's expanding engagement with the Indian Ocean Island states is to further reinforce India's strategic position in the region. India is working closely with strategic partners like the USA, Japan, and France in the Indian Ocean. These states share interests in ensuring the security, stability, and balance of power in the Indian Ocean. The challenge of China is a major driving factor behind the heightened strategic activity in the region. India has no option but to deal with it, and attempt to strengthen ties with the Indian Ocean Island states.

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