

## A Study of India and France in the Indian Ocean

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### Abstract

The geography of young oceanic plates reflects cultural and economic linkages across the shores. These links facilitate trade and allow interaction between languages, literature, the arts, politics, religions, and habitats. These days, oceans serve as hubs for commerce routes, and resource exploration, and connect sea lanes of communication. They are essential to maintaining regional peace, prosperity, sustainable marine governance, and freedom of navigation. In this regard, the Indian Ocean assumes an important role across the given spectrums including an interesting one-geopolitical tug of war. Robert Kaplan foresaw the Indo-Pacific area as the “cockpit of future maritime rivalries” thanks to the new strategic narrative surrounding the region. As a result, some nations’ roles as significant players in the Indian Ocean have emerged. Various nation-states are coming up with their strategy for the Indo-Pacific pertaining to their individualistic requirements and assertions in world politics. It has become the center of academic research, international politics, statecraft, and diplomacy. With multiple regional organizations and minilateral formations like the QUAD, AUKUS, the Indian Ocean, and Indo-Pacific are now seeing more turbulent waters. The role of every nation-state is analyzed in depth to understand their future course of action in the waters of the Indian Ocean. Amongst the hefty presence of multiple actors like India, USA, Japan, UK, Germany, Australia, etc, one major actor remains to be analyzed in depth i.e. France.

The paper adopts descriptive and analytical research methods. It uses quantitative and qualitative data. Policies, strategy papers, etc. are also used. Primary sources like ministries’ briefs and data from international organizations are utilized. Secondary sources constitute journals and books.

**Keywords:** India, France, Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific, India-France partnership.

### Introduction:

The Asian continent bounds the grand IOR at its top and comprises Southeast Asia, and Oceania, on the eastern and the Africa and Arabian Peninsula on the western side. Doyle & Rumley, 2019 commented that the IOR will house 50% of the world's population by 2050 and refer to it as the Ocean of the Future due to its 7 major chokepoints. The beauty of the oceanic waters is calibrated by Steinberg (2001), in his classic- ‘The Social Constructions of Ocean’. He argues that the “social construction of oceanic space has differed across space and time”. The IOR was mostly used as a special trading area in the ancient and medieval past. Even after independence of India, it was not regarded as a geopolitical space for India due to an unanticipated fear of the sea in Indian society and ignorance of Indian polity. The IOR links India with West Asia, South-East Asia, Africa, and the Antarctic Ocean. Deep historical, cultural, and commercial ties between civilizations have been witnessed here. Yet, it was ignored for decades after decolonization and was represented as the geography of threat up to the 1980s (Scott, 2015). However, the scenario is changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Kaplan, (2010) has asserted that the Indian Ocean is a “cockpit of future maritime rivalries”. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the political importance of these waters is seeing another dawn under an aged sun. From a geopolitical perspective, the Indian Ocean has shifted from being India's backyard to a maritime region with a multipolar actor presence. This has led to an intriguing case study of India- France cooperation as well as an analysis of their individual country's unique policy prospects concerning the western Indian Ocean region (WIOR).

### France in the IOR:

The most assertive claim of France as a ‘resident state’ of the IOR is through the presence of its overseas territories of Mayotte and La Reunion Islands. It has the 4<sup>th</sup> largest reef in the arena. These reefs stretch from the Mascarene Islands (La Reunion, Mauritius) and the Mozambique Channel (Europa to Juan de Nova) to Madagascar. These islands in reef support meteorological stations. The station on Tromelin Island provides warnings of cyclones to Madagascar, Mauritius, and Reunion Island. In the post-colonial era- Reunion Island became the base of France in the IOR. Reunion Island is

geographically located east of Madagascar and southwest of Mauritius. Reunion Island was granted the status of Overseas Department of France later overseas region in 1974. The Reunionese voted as French citizens for the Parliament election and sent senators and deputies to the National Assembly. On the given island lies a French military base. France's strategic interest in the WIOR revolves around Reunion Island. The French South Indian Ocean Armed Forces are headquartered there. In addition to Reunion Island, the area contains smaller coral islands called Glorieuses and larger islands like Mayotte. For France, these areas are important both culturally and economically. Economically speaking, they expand the region's exclusive economic zone by a sizable amount. It is crucial for oil traffic, marine resources, and merchandise trade. France also maintains a sizeable force in the given arena with about 1900 troops and a few maritime standing forces with surveillance frigates, patrol vessels, gendarmerie maritime coastal patrol boats, etc. On Mayotte Island, France has kept a small military force known as the Foreign Legion. The French government makes two sets of justifications for its military deployment in the area. First and foremost, to protect the area against illicit operations such as people trafficking, illegal fishing, and arms smuggling. Second is, a result of French territorial disputes in the area (Maupin, 2017). IOR is important for France for multiple reasons. First, France enjoys exclusive marine rights and advantages from products in the territorial, contiguous, and exclusive economic zones due to its island territories in the given arena. Second, the Indian Ocean is ideally situated along the geographic path that links Africa, Europe, and Asia. Europe and France, which depend on the import of gas and oil for energy security, need routes like the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Persia, etc. to meet their energy needs. France has blue economy-driven interests in the IOR. It maintains several strategic alliances with nation-states and island states in the area to ensure that every actor may take advantage of marine security and the blue economy potential. In addition to energy corridors and a blue economy, channeling ties with growing countries and stifling competition in the given arena are strategic imperatives that motivate France's efforts to hold onto its position in the IOR. As a result, alliances have been formed with numerous nations, including Australia, China, India, Sri Lanka, and South Africa (Maupin, 2017). With the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the assumed region of conflict in the future, belligerent China, and partisanship in a world where divisions are clear; the IOR will face issues of multidimensional security which will have ramifications for the entire world.

The African islands in the WIOR have a historical colonial connection with France. Madagascar and Comoros were its colonies, and Mauritius, and Seychelles were occupied by France for a brief period. With the waves of nationalism, these territories became independent (Pathak, 2006). The cultural presence of France in the WIOR is understood through the use of the French language in offices and schools of Madagascar. Both Mauritius and Seychelles are Francophone and a majority of the people speak Creolized French. Madagascar's intellectual elite has studied and acquired degrees in French universities. French is the principal language of the Republic of Comoros (Pathak, 2009). French influence is visible in cultural affairs, civil services, and education. It provides aid diplomacy to the Island States in the given arena. It is also a leading trading partner of Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles. Its defense interests are evident in defense cooperation agreements with Comoros, Madagascar, and Mauritius. It has bases and military facilities in its overseas territories. France's critical military base is in Djibouti which allows it to overlook a major waterway and choke point of Bab-el Mandeb in the IOR. It has a naval presence in the given arena and maintains a surveillance frigate to monitor the region. It patrols major routes like the Suez-Singapore axis. In light of participation in the regional organization in the IOR, France has been a member IOC since 1986. It has been declared the 23<sup>rd</sup> state in the IORA and has joined the IONS as a participant. The recent inclusion of France in IORA speaks volumes of the changing waves across the Indian Ocean and the need for a comprehensive strategy for the Indian Ocean. The geostrategic presence of France in the given arena makes it a power to reckon with. The priority of France in the given arena should be sustainable development, equitable distribution of resources, minimizing inter-state competition, and reducing the risk of traditional and non-traditional threats while maintaining the stability and security of critical sea lanes of communication.

### **India in the WIOR:**

To understand how France's geostrategic presence can be utilized by India to conduct its foreign policy and to mitigate threats of varying nature in the IOR, it is necessary to understand the comprehensive presence of India in these waters and how it coincides with that of France. This can lead to convergence between two parties in the given arena.

The WIOR is significant for India due to cultural linkages to East Africa, economic cooperation, and the presence of strategic locations in maritime trade. The region consists mainly of Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, Reunion Islands, Mayotte, and other coral islands. India maintains a liberal relationship based on complex interdependence in the area of trade. India has strong diasporic linkages with Mauritius and Seychelles. Support through initiatives like SAGAR-Security and Growth for All, Operation Vaccine Maitri, and assistance during oil spills, cyclones, floods, etc are present. The defensive cooperation agreements with Comoros and Madagascar show a tinge of Realism in International Relations. India's involvement in the area is not exclusively motivated by the desire to maximize power or security. Sustaining cultural ties, promoting economic collaboration, and guaranteeing regional security are all commendable goals. The financing of the Supreme Court Building, the Ear Nose Throat Hospital in Mauritius, and the Coastal Surveillance Radar System in the Seychelles are a few examples. The programmes like C.V

Raman Scholarship have helped scholars from Madagascar. President Ram Nath Kovind was the first Indian president to visit Madagascar in 2018. Madagascar received US \$ 108 million in Letters of Credit (LoC) from India in 2008 and US \$ 2.5 million in 2017 for the establishment of fertilizer plants and increased rice output (De & Kumaraswamy, 2020).

A modest approach to training and low-key security agreements started to take shape in the 1970s. The 1980s witnessed a better naval push in the form of leasing nuclear submarines and gifting aircraft carriers to these Island States. India inaugurated the Coastal Surveillance Radar Station and gifted a Dornier aircraft to Seychelles in 2015. India signed a defense cooperation agreement with Mauritius and Seychelles. Similarly, India has provided INS Amar, Dhruv helicopter, and offshore patrol vessel to Mauritius. The zone of cooperation is now comprehensive- ranging from providing assets like surveillance aircraft, and interceptor boats to hydrographic surveys to training to naval officers and naval joint patrols with Mauritian Coast Guard ships. (Mishra, 2019). However, the full-fledged maritime policy for the region was still far from the picture. The scenario significantly changed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the Indian Ocean became a geography of opportunity and the inseparability of India and the Indian Ocean was realized (Scott, 2015). This led to the Indian Navy taking on a wider range of roles in warfare, diplomacy, and constabulary—all predetermined by the 2007 publication of the Indian Maritime Doctrine. Australia, Singapore, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia were added to the countries participating in the bilateral and multilateral naval exercises in 2010. Additionally, the IORA replaced the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IOR-ARC) as extensive institutionalization of regional organization occurred. IONS- the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium also came into the picture. India's strategic central location in the IOR allows it to extend its territory through the Lakshadweep Islands on the west and Andaman and Nicobar Island on the east (PIB, 2012).

As per Cdr Singh (2005)- "India's strategy and aspiration for a strong presence in marine endeavors in the given arena are exemplified by its growing relations with the African Island States". Participating actively in regional architecture started by the Mauritius- IORA is another way, through which India ensures stability in the given arena. India participates as an Observer Member in the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). Additionally, India is the driving force behind IONS, a voluntary initiative to strengthen ties between states that border the ocean. IORA holds a special place for India. It comprises 9 dialogue partners and 23 members. Its primary goal is to support the region's balanced development and sustainable growth through economic cooperation and liberalization. Its priority areas include disaster risk reduction, tourism promotion, blue economy, and narrowly interpreted maritime security. Its beauty lies in its extensive involvement in academic networks across the Indian Ocean. Such leadership-driven relations and roles in the given arena have ultimately resulted in constructing the arc of a 'net security provider' in IOR for India (Singh, 2015). Though, the limitation of small geography and lack of economic and human resources has drawn the upper limit of the bilateral relations between India and these African Island States. This has an ultimate impact on India carrying forward the role of net security provider in the given arena. The status of net security providers in the given arena is a keynote of India's foreign policy in the given arena (PIB, 2011). The net security provider is linked to four factors, according to Mukherjee (2014): a. capacity building; b. military diplomacy; c. military assistance; and d. direct deployment of force. Pant (2014) contends that India has defined the role of a net security provider through four sets of policies: 1. Assurance measures such as the deployment of soldiers (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh.) 2. Prevention Policies (mediation in conflicts). 3. Protection Policies: including terrorism, and organized crime. 4. Compellence Policies (peacekeeping). India's revised Maritime Doctrine (2015)- Ensuring Securing Seas defines the concept of net security provider comprehensively in terms of ensuring security, balancing threats, and countering all risks, threats, and challenges.

### **Challenges in the IOR:**

The region's strategic environment is volatile and dangerous. It is the locus of 70% of the world's natural disasters and is beaming with conflicts related to internal stability and terrorism. The encompassing maritime security is in danger in the IOR. According to Bueger (2015), maritime security can be comprehended in a matrix including seapower, marine safety, and the blue economy. The study of what actors do when they claim to enhance maritime security is also included in the above matrix to map maritime security. The lack of ability and resources deter Island States in the Indian Ocean from dealing comprehensively with illegal fishing, trafficking, and piracy. Maritime enforcement authorities in these regions are challenged by illegal activities of criminals from distant regions like Middle Eastern traffickers and Asian fishing fleets. Other related issue is the debt burden on these countries. Another major strategic obstacle is China's influence in the given arena through the String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road (Mishra & Sen, 2022). Coastal welfare is hindered by illicit activities in Somalia and Kenya. Poor maritime domain awareness in the IOR is leading to the creation of a nexus of drug trafficking and human trafficking. Coastal violence in Mozambique has spread to islands of the IOR leading to the eruption of new violent non-state actors paying allegiance to the Islamic State. The shadow economy has developed as a result of drug transshipment and wildlife trafficking. This has led to the evolution of coastal criminal networks endangering maritime security and the coastal welfare of all. Migration is a pressing challenge in the given arena. The instability in northeast Africa has resulted in a migration of people to the Island states of Madagascar, Reunion Island, Mayotte, and Comoros. These migrants seek French citizenship for better economic opportunities and legal security. Comoros sees it at its worst because of its proximity to Mayotte- a French territory.

Pirates group maintains the capability of launching attacks in the given arena. The instability due to piracy attacks from Somalia has proliferated up to Seychelles. In the maritime security index- Comoros suffers from severely underdeveloped maritime enforcement authority, severely limited port transportation, high poverty rates, and sparse healthcare facilities. Seychelles is marred with illicit trade. Reunion, Mauritius has scored better in the maritime security index with above average scores in maritime enforcement authorities, good governance, etc. Mayotte suffers from irregular migration and economic decline leading to protests and disrupted polity. It is heavily dependent on the transfer of funds from mainland France. Madagascar is performing well in the good governance section but it is vulnerable to climate change. The humungous challenges in the given arena require partnerships between states like Island States, India, South Africa, France, and Australia to be tackled adequately (Maritime Security Index, 2019).

### **India- France Partnership in IOR:**

The foundation of the Indo-French alliance is the mutual respect for democracy, the rule of law, and liberty. In 1998, INFRA signed a strategic partnership. From India's perspective, France is a leading technology supplier, and from France's perspective, India is a valued partner sharing principles of equity-based world order driving global commons. The pillars of strength include civilian nuclear energy cooperation, close cooperation on intelligence and counter-terrorism, spatial cooperation, and defense and military cooperation. Defense and military cooperation are the highlighted ones as joint exercises like Varuna, and Garuda are regular. Import of defense equipment like Rafale, and Scorpene submarines are bright spots. According to Pandey (2019), maritime cooperation has grown to become an important component of Indo-French relations, and both nations are searching for methods to strengthen it. The commencement of the Bilateral Maritime Dialogue in 2015 marked a noteworthy progression in this particular process. A White Shipping Agreement was also signed this time. Through the agreement, it would be feasible to monitor vessels across the entire region, and information pertaining to marine traffic will be shared, thereby enhancing awareness of the maritime environment. Both countries reached a consensus in March 2018 on a Joint Strategic Vision of Cooperation in the IOR. The vision statement states that the two democracies are concerned about the following new difficulties that the IOR is facing: preventing terrorism and piracy, organized crime like illegal fishing and human and drug trafficking; climate change, and disaster risks. Additionally, both parties indicated their readiness to collaborate through trilateral talks with additional nations that share their views (Pandey, 2019). This calibrates the geostrategic importance of the region for France.

Mezard, (2015) talks about the limited India-French partnership in oceanic waters is because of single handedness of foreign policy leading to individual action. He mentions about cooperation of India and France (INFRA) and the missing links of a comprehensive strategy on the part of India and France leading to unutilized geopolitical content in their relationship. It is restricting and narrow to think of IOR in terms of the US-China rivalry zone alone. An even more ambitious plan would be for INFRA to work together to support capacity-building initiatives for the WIOR states like the island states (Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles). He suggests that both countries use initiatives like EUCAP Nestor (Maritime Capacity Building Mission) and Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) to improve their already effective relationship. He further wishes to enhance bilateral partnerships to the trilateral and multilateral framework in the given arena. Sawhney, (2020) sees the Indian Ocean as the region shifting from bipolar to tripolar which has made France appear as a trustworthy partner. This can help France to capitalize on evolving strategic dynamics to increase its reach to southeast Asia and get direct access to the center of the new emerging world order. France is a developed Western power with the capacity of indigenous arms and related technology manufacturing. On the other hand, India stands to benefit from this partnership based on multilateralism-led world order.

### **Conclusion:**

The need of the hour is to have a wide view of maritime security along with accommodating regional and individual interests of states and developing a safe IOR with a blooming blue economy and maritime security led capacity-building to check state and non-state aggressors. In this regard, According to Mezard's (2015) recommendation, Paris and New Delhi ought to hold frequent discussions about the IOR to try and develop a common strategic vision for reducing maritime challenges and the corresponding policy measures. Furthermore, it will broaden the areas of convergence between INFRA where the arms trade predominates. This could also assist India in better comprehending the French maritime vision as well as the EU's maritime security plan. Additionally, India has a track record of performing well in bilateral cooperation against regional and global architectures (Arden, 2018). France's presence in the IOR is strategically significant and can be used to counter non-traditional threats like terrorism, climate change, economic failures, and piracy, as well as traditional threats of aggressive states like China (Pathak, 2009). Given, the changing dynamics of International Politics, France is a more suitable and natural partner for India in the IOR. France must entrench itself into the politics of the Indo-Pacific and India must assist France in doing so. They can strive to maximize strategic gains for each other.

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