

India-France Strategic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean: Towards a Broader Indo-Pacific Convergence

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Abstract

Even before the 'Indo-Pacific' narrative, the Indian Ocean has been historically a theatre of human interaction via maritime trade and a pivot of great power rivalry. The strategic location and economic potential of IOR makes it a volatile and troublesome region in the world. The emerging power dynamics in the region and contestation of power, resources, and dominance among the key players of the region— the US, China, Japan, Australia, India, and France, makes this area a dangerous conflict zone. The IOR (IOR) figures prominently in the strategic outlook of India and France who happen to be the main players of this region amid the growing footprint of China in the region. The strategic partnership has now been expanded to include the IOR, and both countries recognise the critical role they can play in maintaining regional peace, security, and stability. The increasing cooperation in the Indian Ocean is a step closer to the convergence in their respective policy towards Indo-Pacific.

General

“Indian Ocean has long been a hub of great power rivalry and the struggle for its domination has been a perennial feature of global politics”.¹ The world’s third largest water body, the Indian Ocean forms the focal point of security and economic challenges of the 21st century. Since 2008, China’s growing footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), especially with the establishment of a fully functional Chinese base in Djibouti and Chinese naval expansion

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in the region, has raised concerns not only in the Indian strategic community, but also in France, which is a 'resident power' in the Indian Ocean. The changing metrics of power in the IOR has brought India and France to work closely in the maritime domain. There has been a substantial increase in Indo-French maritime security collaboration in recent years, focusing mostly on the Indian Ocean, with the possibility for full-fledged cooperation and coordination in the larger Indo-Pacific framework. A host of factors brings India and France closer in their strategic outlook towards IOR. First, there is a mutual understanding that both the countries need to coalesce their resources to maintain multipolarity, transparency, rule of law and maritime security amid China's growing belligerence in the region. The strained ties between France, the US and Australia in the backdrop of AUKUS (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States for the Indo-Pacific Region) is yet another reason for both the countries to ally together. It is also noteworthy that India is considerably at ease with France and the Indian domestic politics is not divided over France as it is in the case of Indo-US relations. Furthermore, both France and India have historical presence in this region and a huge interest to protect.

With the inclusion of the Indian Ocean in the lexicon of the Indo-Pacific, India becomes a key player in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), given its "coastline of 7,500 km, more than 1380 islands and two million sq km of Exclusive Economic Zone".² France considers itself as an Indo-Pacific resident power and "holds a distinctive place in this part of the world".³ It shares borders with five independent states in the Indian Ocean. The islands of Mayotte and La Réunion, the Scattered Islands and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories form a part of France. To safeguard its interests, France has a total of 7,000 permanent military personnel in this region, of which 4,100 are stationed in the Indian Ocean, and 2,900 in the Pacific. Post Brexit, France is the only European country which has a permanent base in the region.

Strategic Importance of IOR in the broader Indo-Pacific Narrative

In the last decade, the most significant geopolitical development in Asia has been to redefine Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific. The term Indo-Pacific has gained prominence as a geostrategic construct in the foreign and security policies of various countries

like the US, India, Australia, Japan, France, the UK, and ASEAN. However, China doesn't agree with this new nomenclature and perceives it as a "ploy to shift China from the centre of the things and downgrade its importance by inviting in yet another substantial power, India".⁴ Notwithstanding this disagreement, Indo-Pacific has emerged as a new geopolitical nomenclature and strategic frame of reference to replace the previously dominant 'Asia-Pacific' construct.

This change from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific is far from a simple matter of semantics. It is not value-neutral; instead, it is connotative. It is a "purposeful and political attempt by the region's predominant democratic powers"⁵ like the US, India, Australia, and Japan to form "a geospatial redesign" in order "to recognise and to deepen trans-regional ties between the Indian and Pacific Ocean areas and to deal more effectively with China's 'rise' in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa".⁶

Indo-Pacific is a geographical concept containing geo-economics, geopolitical, and geostrategic characteristics. Factors like the power shift, India's rising stature in Asia, growing significance of the Indian Ocean, rebalancing/pivot to Asia strategy of the US, along with regional countries participation contribute to this new reality. Kaplan argues that the "Indian Ocean will become 'centre stage' in the twenty-first century, the place where many global struggles will be played out — including conflicts over energy, clashes between Islam and the West, and rivalry between a rising China and India".⁷

However, a voyage down the history lane reveals that the idea of Indo-Pacific has a long antecedent and that the Indian Ocean has been an integral, even a central part of this idea. Rory Medcalf⁸ traces the historical roots of Indo-Pacific and talks about the centrality of Indian Ocean in this broader context of Indo-Pacific. It unveils that Indian Ocean has been at the focal point even before the contemporary complexity of the Indo-Pacific moment with multiple players and a multidimensional approach. A peep into history further clarifies that even before the advent of the long European colonial era unleashed by Vasco da Gama, it was already 'a densely interconnected world region'.

Indian Ocean did not just provide for the commercial lanes due to its favourable wind and currents for navigation, but it was the same route which facilitated religious and cultural exports.

The arrival of Judaeo-Christianity and Islam in India and the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism from India into the Southeast Asia did take place via this maritime route. The Indian Ocean did serve as a 'cultural sea route'.

The Indian Ocean has long been perceived as strategic. This is evident from the prescient observation by Alfred Thayer Mahan, that "whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia" and "this ocean is the key to the seven seas". Mahan also predicted that "in the 21st century the destiny of the world would be decided on its water". Mahan's observations are proving to be true as the Indian Ocean is assuming greater importance in shaping the present world order.

In the broader context of Indo-Pacific, centred on maritime Asia connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through trade, infrastructure and diplomacy, the prominence of the Indian Ocean stems from the fact that IOR acts as "world's principal source of energy and the highway over which that energy is transported to the rest of the world".⁹ Countries like India, China, Japan, South Korea, and many other countries particularly in South and East Asia, rely heavily on oil import from the Middle East via the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean's strategic location stretches from East Africa to the Indian Subcontinent and Australia, providing key marine lanes that connect the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. The fact that IOR is the busiest and strategically most significant trade corridor with three points (Malacca strait, Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb strait) of the seven choke points of the world, makes it a very vital maritime region. IOR also holds significant hydrocarbon deposits in Saudi Arabia's, Iran's, India's, and Western Australia's offshore areas. The Indian Ocean is home to over 40 per cent of the world's offshore oil output. It has some of the world's fastest-growing economies as well as states with formidable military and naval capabilities. The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, a Sri Lankan research tank, has released a report which estimates that "the Indian Ocean economy will account for 20 per cent of global GDP by 2025".¹⁰ "Its GDP per capita is expected to almost double over this time. The IOR was now the high focus region and currently, the Indo-Pacific accounts for 40 per cent of global trade and 62 per cent of the world's GDP".¹¹

Its significance is heightened by the fact that it is home to two of the world's most populous countries, India and China, which are rising together. Although, the rise of China is phenomenal as compared to India, but the fact remains that the economic growth of both these countries rely heavily on the sea lanes of Indian Ocean for transportation of oil from Middle East and Africa.

Apart from economic security dimension, the IPR also has a military dimension in the shape of China's turn to sea and rapid expansion of its navy, massive ship-building program and the new Chinese strategy about 'offshore waters defence' and 'open-seas protection'¹², which scholars say is a pretext for deploying force in distant waters. In Indian Ocean, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) showed up in 2009 with three warships to counter Somali piracy and has never left. There has been a gradual surge in Chinese vessels in the IOR. "For the first time since the voyages of Admiral Zheng He in the 1400s, China is an Indian Ocean power. This time, instead of sailing ships, it has destroyers, marines and submarines. These conduct exercises peaceful and warlike, backed by partnerships, port access rights and the Chinese military's first overseas base. This time China plans to stay".¹³

Trajectory of India-France Strategic Cooperation in IOR

IOR figures prominently in the strategic outlook of India and France who happen to be the main players of this region. The publication of a Blue Book in 2009 by France talks about 'maritimisation of the world' and it gives due attention to the Indian Ocean. India on its part has brought out its Maritime Strategy titled "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy" in 2015, which provides a renewed focus in the IOR. Keeping in mind the strategic interest of India in Indian Ocean, PM Modi inaugurated SAGAR Initiative — Security and Growth for All in the Region — in 2016 during his tour to Mauritius where he addressed all IOR littoral states.

India-France relations have been more of cooperation than competition. In 1998, the Indo-French bilateral relations were elevated to the level of Strategic Cooperation "which is emblematic of their convergence of views on a range of international issues apart from a close and growing bilateral relationship".¹⁴ Apart from defence, space, and civil nuclear cooperation, three cornerstones for Indo-French Strategic Cooperation, the other areas of Indo-French cooperation are climate change, sustainable growth and development, the International Solar Alliance etc. The traditional

field of strategic cooperation has now been officially extended into the waters of India Ocean with the signing of Joint Vision for IOR in 2018.

Toward Strategic Coordination

The public discourse in India on IOR tends to overlook France's relevance as a regional maritime power in this region. However, the security establishment is becoming more aware of the advantages of working with France in the Indian Ocean. President Macron's accession to power in France has given a new lease to India-France maritime cooperation. Prime Minister Modi's meeting with Macron in Paris in 2017 was followed by many high-level engagements, including trips by Indian air and naval chiefs to Paris. This high-level engagement has become a regular phenomenon in the strategic circle of both the countries. One of the priority areas includes maritime cooperation in IOR. The dialogue is facilitated by regular high level bilateral visits and the working of the bilateral Maritime Dialogue instituted in 2015.

Prime Minister Modi and President Macron signed the Joint Strategic Vision for Cooperation in the IOR on March 10, 2018. The vision statement emphasises the significance of the Indian Ocean to both countries and the "crucial role that the multi-dimensional India-France strategic partnership will play in ensuring peace, security and stability in, and in bringing robust economic growth and prosperity to the Region".¹⁵ It focuses on the area of mutual concern and emerging challenges in the Indian Ocean which includes; "maritime traffic security in the face of the threats of terrorism and piracy, especially in the Horn of Africa; respect of international law by all states, in particular freedom of navigation and overflight; fight against organised crime, trafficking (including in weapons of mass destruction), smuggling and illegal fishing (IUUs); combating climate change and its consequences on security, particularly in terms of natural disasters; protection of the environment and natural resources, including tackling oil spills; and aid to victims of disasters".¹⁶

In yet another significant step towards India-France cooperation in IOR, a MoU on 'Joint Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean' was signed for 'Implementing Arrangement between Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the National Centre for Space Studies (CNES), France, in 2019. In the same year, the President of CNES Jean-Yves Le Gall and the

Chairman of ISRO Sivan K signed an agreement to develop a maritime surveillance system. In the Indian Ocean, this agreement aims to provide an operational system to detect, identify, and track ships. It further aims at capacity sharing to process the existing satellite data and joint development of associated algorithms.¹⁷ A maritime surveillance centre will be established in India as part of this agreement. In yet another significant development, India-France signed Joint Vision for Space Cooperation in 2018 which brings ISRO and CNES to work together to “develop joint products and techniques, including Automatic Identification System (AIS), to monitor and protect the assets in land and sea. (2018)”.¹⁸

The signing of a White Shipping Agreement in 2017 further strengthens the Indo-French maritime cooperation by facilitating the exchange of information on maritime traffic. It also enhances the maritime domain awareness between the two countries and foresees a significant strengthening of naval cooperation to promote security and stability in the Indo-Pacific Region.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, the bilateral naval cooperation between India and France is not a recent phenomenon. It dates back to the Cold War era, when the two countries first engaged in bilateral naval exercise in 1983, which was renamed ‘Varuna’ in 2001. Over a period, it has matured, diversified, and broadened in scope. The 19th edition of the ‘Varuna’, conducted from 25-27 April 2021 in the Arabian Sea, also included ‘advanced air defence and anti-submarine exercises, intense fixed and rotary wing flying operations, tactical manoeuvres, surface and anti-air weapon firings, underway replenishment, and other maritime security operations’. Given the present context of Indo-Pacific which has become a theatre of ‘power projection’, Varuna has become a crucial component of Indo-French strategic partnership in maritime domain. The aim of this exercise is to develop interoperability and strengthen coordination between the two navies, which is needed to maintain regional stability and respond to a crisis.

Beyond the Varuna exercise, France and India hold passage exercises (PASSEX) at regular intervals “to build military relations, develop interoperability and project long range sustenance”²⁰ with the aim to strengthen maritime security in the region. The two countries also have the ‘Provision of Reciprocal Logistics’ to improve cooperation between their militaries and navies. India and France also cooperate in hydrography and marine cartography.

India and France cooperation in IOR is further strengthened through IOR regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)²¹, Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)²² and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)²³. France became the 23rd full member of IORA in 2020 after initial reluctance from some member states, including India, owing to its colonial legacy in the region and Indian traditional stance against the presence of any extra regional power in IOR. However, French inclusion in IORA has been welcomed by India which is evident of the fact that both the countries are converging on the broader international issues. France supports India's admission as an observer to the IOC and encourages India's expanding participation in European Union projects for the IOR. Both the countries share the concern regarding compromised maritime security in IOR and they are committed to implementing practical solutions, such as anti-piracy measures in the Horn of Africa.

In 2020, France appointed a liaison officer at the Information Fusion Centre – IOR (IFC-IOR) which was launched by India in December 2018 'to boost regional maritime awareness, create a common operating procedure for processing radar and sensor data collected by participating countries, and facilitate the dissemination of such data to partners and IORA members'. France and India aspire to synchronise their efforts through the IORA and collaborate on an initiative to reinforce assets in the southern Indian Ocean to combat piracy and other types of illegal marine trade.

Conclusion

As two strong democratic nations in the world, India and France converge on various issues of international concern like support for a multi-polar world order, rule of law and strategic autonomy. In the contemporary Indo-Pacific moment with multiple participants and dimensions, how nations interact with each other will be a deciding factor for the on-going 'great game'. The ever expanding economic, military, and diplomatic activity of China in IOR has come to define the strategic narrative of the Indo-Pacific. The region's strategic issues may be centred around China but the region as a whole is multipolar. To maintain the regional stability and security, regional powers like India and France seem to have taken cognisance which is evident from the convergence in their approach towards IPR. Both the countries focus on inclusiveness and engagement rather than 'containment'.

India and France make a natural ally in the region. Their strategic relations have matured from typical buyer-seller syndrome to incorporate a multidimensional approach in their outlook vis-à-vis each other. The bilateral relationship in the strategic areas like defence, space, nuclear energy, economic and development cooperation, and maritime cooperation has seen an upward trajectory in recent years. France could be a crucial partner for India in IOR. The access to French military bases in IOR gives India further manoeuvring space in the region. Since France has an active presence both in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it can be a reliable partner for India in the wider Indo-Pacific context. The military modernisation and deployment across Indo-Pacific in the quest of power projection includes long-range and maritime capabilities, surveillance, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, drones and cyber warfare and have made this region volatile, dangerous, and prone to great power conflict. In such a scenario, the strategic relations between India and France in IOR can help to maintain peace, stability, and security in the broader IPR by working together and by involving other players in the region. By pooling in their resources, India and France can mutually benefit in this region, as the need of the hour is to maintain multipolarity and to shun hegemony in the region.

Endnotes

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¹⁸ India-France Joint Vision for Space Cooperation, accessed on February 8, 2022 from <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29597/IndiaFrance+Joint+Vision+for+Space+Cooperation+New+Delhi+10+March+2018>

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²⁰ Accessed on February 15, 2022 from <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/ins-tabar-concludes-two-day-naval-exercise-with-the-french-navy/article35405760.ece>

²¹ The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is a dynamic inter-governmental organisation aimed at strengthening regional cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region through its 23 Member States and 10 Dialogue Partners. Accessed on February 13, 2022 from <https://www.iora.int/en/about/about-iora>

²² The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is an intergovernmental organization which brings together five member states: the Union of the Comoros, France in respect of Reunion, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles. Created by the Port-Louis Declaration in 1982, the IOC was institutionalized in Seychelles in 1984 by the General Cooperation Agreement, also known as the "Victoria Accord". Accessed on February 13, 2022 from <https://www.commissionoceanindien.org/presentation-coi/> (my translation)

²³ The 'Indian Ocean Naval Symposium' (IONS) is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues. Accessed on February 13, 2022 from <https://www.ions.global/>