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India's Maritime Diplomacy in South West Indian Ocean: Evaluating strategic partnerships

Abstract

Being a maritime nation with considerable economic and military power, India has shown keen interest in demonstrating its role as a major security provider in the IOR. In the Southwest Indian Ocean too, India has sought to develop a security presence and strengthen its position by capitalising on its historic ties with the littoral nations of the region through provision of military training, defence equipment and security advisors. India's efforts are mostly directed at making the Indian influence more visible in the strategic affairs of the region that seem to be clouded by the increasing Chinese forays into the region.

The paper evaluates the strategic relationships through the maritime dimensions of India's engagement with these littoral nations. The intensity of India's efforts to be seen as an important maritime security providing power of the region and the response of these littoral states to India's call for greater cooperation forms an important thrust of the paper. The article argues that India's national security concerns and great power ambitions manifest itself in India's engagement in the region. However, greater exploitation of its strategic ties with Mauritius and Seychelles hold the key for greater maritime strategic influence in the region.

Introduction

Geographically, India is a maritime state dominated by the world's third-largest ocean, the Indian Ocean. Its influencing position in the Indian Ocean has mostly determined its maritime policy and ambitions in the maritime domain. Its archetypal maritime character and vital geostrategic location are significant twin factors that have nurtured its maritime ambitions. Also given India's strategic position on the world map, any noteworthy initiative of expanding India's influence without any major obstacle can be realized only in the maritime domain. Thus, a section of the Indian elites sees a close association between their country's maritime ambitions and its search for great-power status.¹

Indian maritime aspirations in the Indian Ocean may be identified as seeking pre-eminence and leadership in Indian Ocean affairs. India's maritime diplomacy and aspirations were not realized to the fullest because of the Indian governments' neglect of the navy as against the army and air force. Indian strategic thinkers have always considered the most vital threats to India's security as originating from land, specifically from the north-west. With the economic liberalization of the 1990s, India has recorded an impressive annual growth rate of 7-8 per cent during the last 20 years or so. With continued growth, India has emerged as a key political and economic player at the global level. This has resulted in a wide expansion of India's global interests. To maintain unhindered economic growth, India needs to protect its overseas trade, investment, and energy flows. Hence, India is particularly concerned in protecting its sea-lanes of communications necessary for its energy exports. Thus, India has adopted an active maritime policy where trade, security, and connectivity have become the major issues of India's maritime diplomatic goals.

India's strategic interests in the Southwest Indian Ocean have widened in recent times as India considers the Indian Ocean Region as its primary sphere of influence. As such, strategic influence among the littoral nations of the Southwest Indian Ocean figures crucial to India's security interests. The South-West Indian Ocean comprises of the island nations of Mauritius, Seychelles, and La Reunion. The region is also called the 'Latin Quarter' because of the preponderance of French spoken in its many island states and territories. The Mozambique Channel is the major focus of maritime security in the South-West Indian Ocean as it is the key route for shipping between the Middle East and the Atlantic Ocean. The Mozambique Channel was once a

primary trading route between Asia, Europe, and the Americas before the opening of the Suez Canal. While commercial traffic at recent times has slowed down, the Mozambique Channel continues to be strategically important for the eastern coast of Africa. France is the strongest power in and around the Mozambique Channel with the island of La Reunion as its territory. It is through this base that the French navy maintains its strong presence in the western Indian Ocean and the eastern coast of Africa. In addition, France patrols the Mozambique Channel and maintains a presence in the exclusive economic zone around several French islands in the channel through this base.²

The article analyses the status of India's strategic partnership with the island nations of the Southwest Indian Ocean, viz. Mauritius, Seychelles, and le Reunion. The article evaluates the strategic relationships through the maritime dimensions of India's engagement with these littoral nations. While doing so, it throws light on the importance of the Southwest Indian Ocean to India's strategic interests and the renewed importance given to extending maritime cooperation in the region. The intensity of India's efforts to be seen as important maritime security providing the power of the region and the response of these littoral states to India's call for greater cooperation forms an important thrust of the article. The article essentially develops around two hypotheses. First, India's national security concerns and leading power ambitions drives its engagement in the Southwest Indian Ocean. Second, India's strategic ties with Mauritius and Seychelles hold the key for greater maritime influence in the region.

Importance of the South West Indian Ocean to India's Strategic Interests

The South-West Indian Ocean, which comprises of the island nations of Mauritius, Seychelles, and France, provides an interesting opportunity to India to build a greater leading role, if not the supreme sphere of influence. In addition, as the largest Indian Ocean littoral state, with a stable democratic polity and credible maritime power, India has an important and meaningful role in the security scenario of the region.

Islands have always played an important role in maritime strategy, but its significance has been underappreciated in the diplomatic circles of India until recent times. Traversing through history, we could find that rising nations have controlled strategic islands to project power across

vast areas of the globe. However, the end of the Cold War, development of nationalism in these littoral island nations and the gradual acceptance of the established international order brought down the occupation of islands as territories of western powers.³ The mounting significance of the island nations of this region is that India's access to and influence over these islands will provide strategic advantages like longer maritime deployments, possible military infrastructure, thereby influencing the response from the other competitors.

India has had a strong relationship with the two of littoral countries of the region viz. Mauritius and the Seychelles. Nonetheless, the changing geopolitical environment, China's increasing forays into the Indian Ocean, and the Indo-French *bonhomie* facilitated India's activism in the littoral countries of the South-West Indian Ocean. As Beijing continues to expand its presence across the maritime domain, India has reshaped its maritime strategies to secure its national interests, more so in the Indian Ocean Region. As with any other maritime space, the islands of the South-West Indian Ocean region have a significant influence in shaping the new security architecture in the region.

For India, the most crucial strategic islands in the South West are Mauritius and the Seychelles. These islands span the ocean from India to Africa. Their strategic importance is highlighted by their location along key sea-lanes of communication (SLOCs). These islands are vital to and can facilitate a navy's continuous presence along, key international shipping routes, allowing a navy to patrol and secure SLOCs during peace times and an option to interdict and cut off an adversary's communications during times of conflict. Such presence allows navies to project power, increasing their profile as a net security provider. Operations from and near these four islands provide good coverage of the south and the central Indian Ocean and thus developing strategic relationships with these countries is vital for India's security and economic interests.

Change of Policy and Alignment in the National Government Regarding the South-West Asian Region

If one analyses the timeline of India's maritime diplomatic practices, one could easily find that the vigor and determination to protect and enhance its maritime interests in the IOR had received a considerable boost with the start of the 21st century. Things started changing with an element of pragmatism aided with a neo-liberal approach replacing the

ambiguity of Indian maritime aspirations. This was the period where the economy showed signs of progress and the fastest growing rate because of various structural changes brought in the previous decade. After years of hesitation, India has done away with its inward-looking foreign policy and has started seeing the South-West Asian region as an important area of interest. In 2013, Manmohan Singh stated in a speech “we (India) have also sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.”⁴ Twenty-first century India witnessed the change of power in administration along with the adoption of maritime strategies by the Indian Navy. With changes of time and in global circumstances, India has displayed more enthusiasm in protecting its legitimate rights and aspirations in the IOR. This increasing focus is because of the realization of the strategic advantage that India holds, being surrounded by the ocean, which also carries 90% of its foreign trade. In addition, the importance of developing strategic relationships with the littoral states of the IOR has been intensified by China's increased naval power projection in the IOR. China has expanded its strategic reach and influence in the region by supporting various economic enterprises in the island nations of the region. With the recognition of the necessity to interact more actively with littoral states of the IOR in a bid to minimize Chinese influence in the region, active maritime security engagements have emerged as a cornerstone of India's regional foreign policy initiatives. Thus, with the changes of time and circumstances in the region, India has significantly reshaped its maritime strategy and looks forward to greater involvement in the maritime affairs of the region.

Status of India's Maritime Influence in the South-West Indian Ocean

With the growth and evolution of the Indian Navy, it has moved beyond its self-demarcated maritime domains of the IN stretching from the Red Sea to the Malacca Straits and has established crucial interests in projecting itself as one of the major security providers in the region. In this, along with an increasingly optimistic leadership with a growing and robust naval force, the political will of these littoral countries stands as an imperative in the fulfilment of India's maritime ambitions with the littoral countries of the South-West Indian Ocean.

Since independence, India has shown a profound interest in being a maritime security provider throughout the southwest IOR (Indian Ocean Region) through combating Somalia-based piracy and help in the policing of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the island nations. Capitalizing on the long history of bilateral trust and goodwill with the littoral nations of the South West Indian Ocean, India has been successful in building strategic relationships with Mauritius and Seychelles through its security and economic partnerships and has improved its relationship with France. India's relationship with the Seychelles and Mauritius presents an interesting scenario where it has been successfully balancing the demands of major powers for using it for military purposes while at the same time relying on India as a sort of benign security guarantor. In recent years, France has recognized India's rise as an influential power in Asia and thus has taken due note of India's growing naval ambitions. Meanwhile, India's desire to build a greater leading role is challenged by France's traditional stronghold and the increasing American and Chinese influence into the region.

It may be noted that the United States has a permanent base in Diego Garcia, which gives it a strategic upper hand in the maritime affairs of the region. This strategically significant island was leased to the United States for setting up a military base in 1966 by the UK. Diego Garcia has served as a hub for American troops during their war against terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, there are increasing Chinese forays into the region where China has invested heavily in a special economic zone in Mauritius along with other strategic investments on the island. China plans to build a logistics and services hub in the economic zone, together with a university and an oceanographic research Centre.⁵ Thus, China's growing relationship with Mauritius and other Indian Ocean littoral nations threaten to dilute India's traditional influence in the region. This has led India to take a more assertive approach in improving its influence and building strategic partnerships with the littoral regions of the South-West Indian Ocean. However, in order to understand India's present status in the strategic scenario of the South-West Indian Ocean, a brief review of the strategic relationships with the principal island nations of Mauritius, the Seychelles, and France is undertaken in the following section.

India's Relationship with Mauritius

India's relationship with Mauritius goes long back to colonial history where the European colonists imported indentured labor from India to work in its sugar cane plantations in Mauritius. However, diplomatic

relations between India and Mauritius started in 1948, and since then diplomatic ties have continually deepened, and today they touch diverse areas of cooperation. After attainment of independence on March 12, 1968, the first Prime Minister and the Father of the Mauritian Nation Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam accorded centrality to India in its foreign policy. With a strong population of Indian descent, Mauritius had always favored Indian strategic interests and acts as a key security partner in the region. India has considered Mauritius one of its closest international partners and has acted more or less in cooperation with the United States on issues relating to Mauritius. After the departure of the British Royal Navy in 1974, India effectively played an important role in protecting Mauritius' security. India has helped establish the Coast Guard of Mauritius for policing its EEZ and has provided training and equipment to the security forces.⁶ India's strategic relationship with Mauritius was further strengthened with the assistance providing in averting numerous political coups during the early and mid-80s.

Highlighting the bilateral trust and goodwill between India and Mauritius is the fact that India provides the commander of the Mauritian Coast Guard and Police Helicopter Squadron.⁷ The Indian Navy has also been providing maritime security to Mauritius' EEZ through periodic patrols since 2003. Since 2009, Indian and Mauritius' maritime forces are involved in jointly patrolling the Mauritian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as Indian naval ships make regular port calls to the nation and conduct exercises with its Coast Guard. India has also helped Mauritius in building its National Hydrographic Unit as well as the coastal radar system that has both economic and strategic purposes. It may be noted that Mauritius has been able to avoid the costs of maintaining a dedicated military force to fulfil its security requirements and has maintained only paramilitary capabilities. This is because of its close defense and security relationship with India, which acts as its security guarantor that accomplishes the strategic interests of both the nations.⁸

India has given several Line of Credits to Mauritius since 2010, for the purchase of security equipment like offshore patrol vehicles, specialized equipment and vehicles, and waterjet fast attack craft. These lines of credit given to the country have proved to be essential for the security of its economy as the nation is affected by non-traditional threats like illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, piracy, and the possibility of maritime terrorism that invariably affect Mauritius and its economic

interests. India has also installed a radar coastal surveillance system throughout the Mauritian island chain. It includes five stations on the islands of Mauritius and one each on Rodrigues, Saint Brandon, and the Agalega Islands.⁹

Since 2006, New Delhi has been discussing with Port Louis for a long-term lease of the strategically significant Agalega islands to India ostensibly for tourism.¹⁰ However, it has been widely speculated that New Delhi anticipates upgrading an airstrip on North Agalega to service Indian manned and unmanned surveillance aircraft.¹¹ Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visited Mauritius in 2015, where the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding to improve cooperation on ocean economy, culture, agriculture, sea and air transport facilities in Agalega and increase capabilities of the Mauritian Defense Forces in safeguarding their interests that further strengthened their partnership.¹² During the visit, the Offshore Patrol Vessel Barracuda, built by an Indian shipyard under a Government of India Line of Credit, was also commissioned into the Mauritian National Coast Guard.¹³ Since the agreement on Agalega islands, there have been several reports anticipating Indian naval and coastguards' interests to set up transponder systems and surveillance infrastructure, which has led to some local protest.¹⁴ At present, the government is closely watching a battle brewing in the Mauritius parliament over the project. Accusing of compromising with the sovereignty of the nation, the Opposition questioned the government over India's involvement in the project. They also raised issues regarding its costs and a possible military component. Thus, the Jugnauth led government had a hard time convincing the national assembly, further stalling the process. Nonetheless, the \$87 million project, to be funded by India, has been awarded to two Indian companies. The Hindu, reports that surveys have begun to fulfil the contract signed on September 2018, which stipulated that construction begins by February 12, 2019, and be completed in 2021.¹⁵ If this materializes, it would significantly improve India's air surveillance capabilities throughout the Western Indian Ocean, including the Mozambique Channel. Brahma Chellaney, an Indian expert on security issues, said using Agaléga as a "logistics hub" could help Delhi "sustain naval operations in the south-west Indian Ocean."¹⁶

In 2017, the Mauritian Prime Minister Pravin Kumar Jugnauht chose India as his first foreign visit where they signed four agreements, one including an agreement on maritime security. Further, both the

countries have agreed that effective management of conventional and non-conventional threats in the Indian Ocean is fundamental for pursuing economic opportunities. Both the nations agreed to cooperate against piracy, humans and drugs trafficking as well as illegal fishing and other forms of illegal exploitation of marine resources. India is also supporting the National Coast Guard of Mauritius to augment its capacity through Project Trident, an integrated development project of the NCG. India will also renew the life of the Coast Guard Ship Guardian, which was given to Mauritius under an assistance program.¹⁷

The Indian President visited Mauritius on March 2018 where he announced a US\$100 million new line of credit (LOC) to the nation for the procurement of the Multipurpose Offshore Patrol Vessel along with an additional grant component of US\$5 million.¹⁸ Highlighting that “India and Mauritius share common security concerns in the Indian Ocean Region,” the President identified Mauritius as India’s “gateway” to Africa as well as the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). According to President Kovind, the two countries have a “natural convergence” of interests and “exemplary” bilateral cooperation in maritime security and counterterrorism.¹⁹ Therefore, the LOC (US\$100 million) meant for another offshore patrol vehicle to be provided by India as announced by India’s President Kovind is in line with India’s consistent policy to strengthen the surveillance and reconnaissance capacity of the Mauritian National Coast Guard by modernizing it further.²⁰ Thus, a sharp increase in the quantum of the Indian LOCs to Mauritius also highlights the significance being given to the relationship. The recent LOC announced by President Kovind for acquiring another offshore patrol vessel reinforces the strategic depth of the relationship between the two countries.

India’s Strategic Ties with the Seychelles

The Seychelles archipelago, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, has been successfully balancing the demands of major powers for using it for military purposes while at the same time relying on India as a sort of benign security guarantor. India-Seychelles diplomatic relationships started soon after the independence of the Seychelles in 1976. Since then, India and Seychelles enjoy a relationship developed on close friendship, understanding, and cooperation. There has been a high-level exchange of visits since Seychelles attained its independence.

India’s close relationship with the Seychelles started from the year 1982 when President Albert Rene sought India’s help to intervene in an

attempted coup by foreign mercenaries and protect him.²¹ In 1986, India's status as a benign security guarantor to the Seychelles was further recognized when an attempted coup against President Rene was prevented with the help of the Indian Navy.²² Coup threats against the Seychelles government receded by the late 1980s. Hereafter, the India-Seychelles security relationship focused on training the Seychelles security forces.²³ Among other things, India built the Seychelles Defense Academy in 1989 and was largely responsible for its management. India has also been policing the Seychelles' EEZ under a bilateral defense cooperation agreement signed in 2003. India also provides training to the Seychelles Special Forces in VIP protection, commando operations and diving. Under its defense cooperation, India also acquired the privilege and power of supplying a maritime security advisor and naval advisor to the Seychelles President.²⁴ The Indian Navy is known to conduct anti-piracy patrols and hydrographic surveys regularly in the waters of the Seychelles. India has also started the construction of a coastal surveillance radar system in the Seychelles.²⁵

In June 2010, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced India's decision to write off almost half of Seychelles' debt to India. This gesture was widely seen as a strategy to bring back the Seychelles from the growing incentives of Chinese assistance. In the months following Prime Minister Singh's announcement, the then Indian foreign minister S.M. Krishna and defense minister A.K. Anthony visited the Seychelles in July 2010. During his visit, Anthony sought to strengthen Indo-Seychelles defense partnership by better institutionalizing the previously ad hoc defense cooperation between the two countries. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's visited Seychelles in 2015 as part of his three-nation trip in the IOR, which was the first Prime Ministerial level visit to the nation in 34 years. It was a highly successful visit with substantive outcomes, including the signing of four Agreements/MoUs concerning Renewable Energy Cooperation, Cooperation in the field of Hydrography; Protocol on Sale of Navigational Charts / Electronic Navigational Charts; and Agreement on the Development of facilities on Assumption Island. Again, Seychelles President James Alix Michel's visited India in Aug 2015, when five agreements on bilateral air services, agricultural cooperation, blue economy, tax information exchange, and gifting of a second Dornier aircraft to Seychelles were signed.²⁶

India and Seychelles have an elaborate architecture of defense and security cooperation that has deepened over the years with the growing

piracy menace and other economic offences in the strategic Indian Ocean region. By 2010, India focused on assisting the Seychelles to counter piracy in its neighboring waters. In pursuance of the MOU on Hydrography signed during the Prime Minister's visit in Mar 2015, Indian Naval Ship INS Darshak visited Seychelles from 5 Nov to 19 Dec 2015 to conduct a hydrographic survey of Victoria Port and adjoining areas. Two patrol boats PS Topaz and PS Constant were gifted by India to Seychelles in 2005 and 2014 respectively. Indian Coast Guard's Fast Interceptor Boat C-405 (rechristened 'PB Hermes') was gifted to Seychelles in 2016.²⁷ Acting on its maritime strategy of bringing the littoral countries under its arena, India gifted one Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft to Seychelles in 2013 and the second promised Dornier aircraft was delivered to Seychelles in June 2018. India gifted and installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in Seychelles in 2015, enabling better coastal security for Seychelles.

During Seychelles, President Danny Faure's six-day visit to India in June 2018, India, and Seychelles agreed to work together on the project to develop a naval base at the Assumption Island, keeping each other's concerns in mind. Faure remarked that the Assumption Island project was discussed and the two countries equally agreed to work together bearing each other's interests.²⁸ The significance Assumption Island is its location in the outer group of the 115 islands that make up the boundary of Seychelles, lying north of Madagascar. A joint military build-up would have immensely benefitted both the nation's geo-strategic interests along with countering the growing menace of piracy off the Mozambique coast. It may be reminded that there has been growing political opposition in Seychelles to this agreement signed with India. Nonetheless, India ramped up its defense partnership with the Indian Ocean Region country by handing over a Dornier aircraft and a USD 100-million defense related credit to Seychelles for augmenting its defense capabilities.²⁹ The military and naval assistance being provided by the Indian government to Seychelles are aimed at ensuring free, open, and inclusive Indian Ocean Region, which has been recapitulated in its policy of Security and Growth for All in the Region. Through this policy, the Indian government is trying to promote safe and inclusive growth across the waters of the ocean by engaging all stakeholders and littoral nations of the region.

The Seychelles has so far been successful in balancing the power struggle for influence by major Indian Ocean powers like the United States, the UAE, and China to its own advantage. However, in the light

of India's growing anxiety over PLAN's access to Port Victoria for the operational turnaround of PLAN vessels, New Delhi was assured by the Seychelles President that India's status, as the Seychelles' "main development partner" would remain non-negotiable.³⁰ This indicates that India has been able to safeguard its strategic partnership with Seychelles and strengthen the relationship even with changing times.

India's Strategic Understanding with France

France is the strongest power in and around the Mozambique Channel where the French Department of Reunion, about 200 km off Mauritius, is the headquarters of the French South Indian Ocean armed forces. Its large base at Djibouti and its ownership of Antarctic territories, which include the Kerguelen Islands, St Paul and Amsterdam Islands and the Crozet Islands, support France's security presence.

Historically, India has had a special regard for France for its semi-autonomous strategic posture within the Western alliance. However, concerned about growing Indian influence in the Reunion islands with around 25 per cent of the population of Indian descent, France hesitated to open an Indian consulate in Reunion until 1986. Thus, there was a degree of low-level competition between India and France for strategic influence relating to French cultural influence in Mauritius and its physical proximity to Reunion islands.³¹

In addition, France was not invited to be a member of the Indian Ocean Region- Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) during its formation in 1997. As per the criteria of membership, only littoral states could be part of IORA. France claim for qualification is through its territories in the Indian Ocean. Despite the support from Australia, South Africa, and Singapore for French membership, India refused to bring France in the grouping fearing a potentially influential competitor to the organization.³² In addition, the former French colonies of Mauritius and Seychelles resisted France becoming a member of the IORA, as it believes that their voice in the group could be muffled.³³ Therefore, France had to be content with the status of a dialogue partner in IOR-ARC.

However, since the last decade or so, particularly after the coming to power of the UPA government in India, the strategic relationship between India and France has improved, with France realizing that India will rise as an influential power in Asia and so it should be engaged early on to shape the future strategic equations in the region.

France has taken due note of India's growing naval ambitions and has anticipated that the Indian Navy is going to be a major force in the Indian Ocean in the near future, and has become increasingly comfortable with an expanded Indian maritime security presence in the region.

France has also encouraged India's growing role in policing the South-West Indian Ocean against pirates. However, while supporting India's rise, it has also tried to ensure that India would acknowledge its legitimate interests in the IOR. The consolidation of India's and France's strategic perspectives on the Indian Ocean was globally seen as part of a broader pattern of Indo-French defense cooperation in the Indian Ocean. The UPA government also invited France to be a member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in 2008. France has derived great satisfaction in that it was the only Western country to be invited by India for launching the IONS. However, as regards the conduct of joint operations with the French Navy, the UPA government stuck to the Indian tradition of opting out of any coalition operations that are not under the aegis of the United Nations. As an alternative, New Delhi is seen organizing anti-piracy operations as part of the recent IONS. However, India has now accepted France as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. As part of its strategic partnership in the IOR, India has sought to include France in annual bilateral naval exercises, since 1993, which have grown in size and complexity. Since 2001, these exercises have been termed "Varuna," and 18 editions of the same have been conducted until date. The 2018 edition of the Varuna naval exercise focused on submarine and anti-submarine warfare, along with building greater maritime domain awareness.

France's most important strategic partnership with India concerns armament transfers, often a critical factor in its external relations. India's lucrative arms market has often lured defense industries the world over. France has won a series of contracts, including the transfer of six Scorpene submarines in 2005 and the upgrading of the Indian aircraft fleet of Mirage 2000 in 2010.³⁴ Since 2012, New Delhi and Paris have worked on a new series of important orders: An agreement to co-develop and co-produce short-range surface-to-air missiles has reached the final phase along with the initiation of negotiations for a US\$12 billion contract for the transfer of 126 Rafale fighter jets. At present, India had signed a government-to-government deal with France in 2016 to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets at the cost of about Rs 580

billion (Rs 58,000 crore).³⁵ New Delhi's policy of strengthening its strategic partnership with Paris also consists of defense and technology development.

French President Emmanuel Macron's visited India on the Indian Prime Minister's invitation on March 2018. In a change of policy and reaching a major breakthrough in maritime cooperation, India and France signed an agreement to access each other's military facilities, including opening naval bases to warships.³⁶ This agreement could potentially improve the reach and deployment of Indian naval forces in the southern Indian Ocean. In total, fourteen agreements were signed during the visit. However, the key defense agreement signed was for the "provision of reciprocal logistics support between their Armed Forces."³⁷ The agreement echoes similarity to that signed by India with the United States in 2016, which allowed the use of each other's installations for repair and replenishment of supplies by the militaries of each country. According to the India-French joint statement, the agreement will facilitate the reciprocal provision of logistic support, supply, and services between the Indian and French armed forces during authorized port visits, joint exercises, and joint training among others.³⁸ This agreement came in the backdrop of professed closer cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. Prime Minister Modi commented that both the countries believe in the potentiality of the Indian Ocean region playing a important role in the happiness, progress, and prosperity of the world. He reiterated that both the nations are committed to strengthening cooperation in areas of environment, maritime security, marine resources, and freedom of navigation and over flight. Echoing these words, the French President said both the countries would have "unprecedented" level of cooperation to ensure peace and stability in the Indian and the Pacific Ocean.³⁹ Overall, it may be seen that France now appreciates India as a key partner in providing logistical support for the deployment of the French fleet and naval aviation in peacetime and a potential partner in regional crisis prevention. In addition, India acknowledges France as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and intends to work with it to promote stability in the region.

Conclusion

If we compare India's strategic influence in the South-West Indian Ocean, we will find that the region provides an interesting opportunity to India to build a greater leading role, if not the supreme sphere of

influence. India has traditional ties with most of the island states in the South-West Indian Ocean region, owing to a sizeable population of Indian descent and being the natural successor to most of British Indian Ocean Territories. As such, since independence, India has taken over the responsibility of being the net security provider of the region. However, New Delhi's effort to be a net security provider in the region is restricted by the powerful American and French presence in the region through their respective overseas territories. More so, the growing Chinese influence in the Seychelles and Mauritius has been a major concern in India's strategic circles, which has threatened to dilute India's traditional influence in the region.

India's recent focus to deepen ties with the island nations of the Indian Ocean region is largely dictated by national security concerns and great power ambitions. India's maritime security cooperation with the littoral nations of the region is directed at ensuring greater visibility of the Indian flag and countering the growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. As the Indian navy is looking forward to continuous deployments in seven key areas of the Indian Ocean, developing access to and collaboration with these littoral islands has become significantly more important for India's strategic interests. While India has been successful in maintaining a presence in Mauritius and Seychelles through annual patrols and assistance in those waters, India's lack of logistical support stands in the way of ensuring sustained presence required for an effective mission based deployment. Nevertheless, the recently concluded joint collaboration, such as logistics agreements with France and the United States has the potential of slightly overcoming the operational challenges faced in the region. In addition, if the arrangements in Assumption Island in the Seychelles and the Agalega Islands of Mauritius come to fruition in the near future, it would significantly improve India's air surveillance capabilities throughout the Western Indian Ocean, including the Mozambique Channel. Thus, India's strategic partnership with Mauritius and Seychelles holds the key for greater strategic influence in the region. Hence, Indian efforts at building possible military infrastructure in Seychelles and Mauritius underline New Delhi's realization of its challenges in operating in those waters.

India enjoys considerable goodwill among the nations of the Southwest Indian Ocean, and so New Delhi needs to reciprocate the confidence bestowed on the nation and be more assertive in portraying as the net security provider of the region. The decision to expand the reach of the

Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives by inviting Mauritius and Seychelles in 2014 as 'guests' is a welcome direction in this step. However, there has been no meeting of national security advisors of the concerned parties since then, and India needs to show more seriousness in including them in an expanded maritime security construct. New Delhi's efforts in the region should not be in the form of reactions to Chinese inroads in the region, but be based on a continued strategic engagement focused on economic and security partnership. India should also continue to improve its relationship with France that has seen major converging of interests among them in recent times. The efforts to build a major strategic role in the region should be more consistent than what has been evident over the last decade or so. Thus, India's hopes of becoming a leading security guarantor in the region depend on how it engages the littoral island nations in a coherent regional framework and re-examining its strategic partnership with the greater powers of the region.

Endnotes

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