

Maritime Security Interests: India in the Western Indian Ocean

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Abstract: *The Western Indian Ocean is a maritime gateway to Europe and North America from Asia. Consisting of the African littoral states, the region has an abundance of rare-earth materials and energy resources. The vital chokepoints and SLOCs in the region make it an important Exclusive Economic Zone. India's presence in the region can be traced to the medieval period when its traders used these sea routes for trade with the Arabs and Persia. But this maritime contact gradually eroded under the British Empire. Post-independence, India's maritime policy remained largely inward and continental. It was after the change of the century that India realized the importance of the maritime domain in its strategic doctrine. The growing Chinese presence, energy security, and the protection of the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean Region contributed to this policy reorientation. Since the last decade, India has attempted to enhance cooperation with the Western Indian Ocean littorals, situated either near or at the chokepoints. India has been actively involved in the region through HADR, SAR, and anti-piracy operations. The African Ocean Rim littorals also regard India as a dependable security partner. In some cases, India has established itself as a security guarantor, as is arguably the case with Mauritius and the Maldives. There is also the possibility of broader cooperation with like-minded partners like France and Japan to counter China in the region. In this context, the paper looks into India's active participation in the region, under its broader Indian Ocean policy, to fulfill its aspiration of emerging as a great power.*

Keywords: *India, Western Indian Ocean, The Maldives, Mauritius, SLOCs.*

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Introduction:

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world with an area of 68.5 million sq. km., surrounded by the continents of Asia, Africa, and Australia. But, as a distinct geographical area, there have been disagreements in defining the exact boundaries of the Indian Ocean¹. The Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) is a sub-theatre of the Indian Ocean lying between Strait of Hormuz; Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb; east coasts of Yemen, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates; southern coasts of Iran and Pakistan; Cape Agulhas; and down to latitude 60°S (the northern-most limit of the Southern Ocean). The WIOR consists of the African Indian Ocean Rim littoral States of Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Comoros, and the French Overseas territories of Reunion, Tromelin Island, Mayotte, Clipperton, and French Southern and Antarctic Lands. It also includes the British Indian Ocean Territories of the Chagos archipelago and the atoll of Diego Garcia and the islands of Juan de Nova, Bassas da India, and Isle de l'Europa in the Mozambique Channel. Together, the WIOR constitutes an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and is of immense strategic importance. As a result, it has become a hotbed of geostrategic contestation among major world powers like India, China, France, the US, Japan, etc.

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is a strategic sub-theatre connecting the African Indian Ocean littoral states with the broader Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Mozambique Channel lying between Comoros in the North and Madagascar in the West is an important chokepoint. The Mozambique Channel, Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb are important passways for commercial vessels and oil tankers. The region has an abundant presence of rare minerals and oil plants. Moreover, the potential presence of natural gas reserves in the Mozambique Channel coupled with the increasing geostrategic significance of the African coastal littoral states contributes to the growing importance of this region in the Indo-Pacific security framework. History has in records that major world powers have used the Islands for maritime warfare and security. For example, the islands of Okinawa and Hawaii remained strategic assets for the allied powers during World War II. Today, many of these islands are sovereign nations with independent foreign policy, and can significantly alter the regional security environment with their choices². They are key assets in the emerging geopolitical, geoeconomics, and geostrategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, engagement with these littoral states will help to realize India's potential in the Indo-Pacific and contribute to fulfilling its aspiration as a net security provider in the region.

Statement of Problem

What is the driving force behind India's reoriented Indian Ocean policy?

How is the "2-Ms" integral to India's Western Indian Ocean policy?

Methodology

To write this article content analysis and observation methods have been employed. In this study, data have been collected primarily from secondary sources like different published books, journals, internet sources, published research papers and articles, newspapers, etc.

Indian Strategic & Security Interests in the Western Indian Ocean

Owing to the changing regional balance of power, India's strategic thinkers began to prioritize maritime security along with continental security. India considers the IOR as its strategic backyard. Due to its geographic position above the Indian Ocean and the presence of a vast peninsula, India is increasingly seen as a maritime power in the region. Some strategic thinkers even consider the Indian Ocean as "India's Ocean". Kapila³ (2012) observed, "*The Indian Ocean stands aptly named because India's peninsular geographical configuration... places [it in a] unique commanding position on the Bay of Bengal on the eastern flank of the Deccan Peninsula and the Arabian Sea on the western flank. In strategic maritime terms, India is in a position to dominate the vast expanse of maritime waters from... the Gulf of Aden ... all the way down south to the outermost extremities of the ... [Southern Oceans].*". India's emerging maritime interests are associated with its aspiration to become a great power. As Pranab Mukherjee⁴ (2007) observed, "*... after nearly a millenni[um] of inward and landward focus, we are once again turning our gaze outwards and seawards, which is the natural direction of view for a nation seeking to re-establish itself, not simply as a continental power, but even more so as a maritime power, and consequently as one that is of significance on the world stage.*". In the IOR, India's main objective is to project itself as a net security provider. This Indian view was also endorsed by former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates. He held that the US wanted India to play the role of security provider in the region and beyond. Among the Indian strategic thinkers, many believe that whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This Indian thinking was inspired by naval strategist Alfred Mahan⁵, who believed, "*Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.*"¹.

In recent years, to counter the growing Chinese presence in the IOR, the Indian Navy has reoriented its Indian Ocean naval strategy. Driven by its great power aspirations, New Delhi is expanding its maritime capabilities and strategic partnership with the Indian Ocean Rim littoral states. The IOR division formed under the Ministry of External Affairs is tasked with the responsibility to promote coordination with these Indian Ocean littorals and the region at large.⁶ The objective is to pay greater attention to building relationships with countries that are key entry points to the WIOR.⁷ The chokepoints of the Mozambique Channel and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait along the African coastline are expected to shape the future dynamics of the Indian Ocean power struggle. India has planned to open eighteen new diplomatic missions

in the African continent to pursue its multifaceted interests in the region. India is making efforts to develop the maritime capabilities of the IOR littorals. India has partnered with like-minded countries like France and Japan for infrastructure development, achieving SDGs, tackling rising sea levels, warming of the ocean, anti-piracy operations, and protecting regional biodiversity and marine ecosystem. In 2016, together India and Japan launched the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to exploit the development possibilities connecting Asia and Africa through the IOR.⁸ The initiative is seen as a counter to the Chinese ‘cheap, but shoddy’ development projects under the Maritime Silk Road Initiative in the region.

France is a key security partner for India in the WIOR. Accepting the realities of the changing global scenario, both these states have embraced the virtues of multipolarity. In the persisting environment of increasing Chinese aggression in the Indian Ocean Region, President Macron in 2019 complemented the closer strategic cooperation between India and France in the region. This strategic cooperation ranges from sharing the analysis of joint maritime security, deployment of Indian navy maritime patrol vessels in Reunion islands, joint surveillance, etc. In March 2020, India and France conducted a joint coordinated patrol from the Reunion Island, the naval base of France in the WIO. India usually conducts coordinated patrol or CORPAT with its maritime neighbors like Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, Thailand, Seychelles, Myanmar, and Indonesia for the surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zones. This was the first time that India conducted such a maritime exercise with any foreign power. This change in stance reflects India’s resolve to engage with like-minded foreign powers in expanding its sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean Region.⁹ France has advocated for India’s active role in the South-Western Indian Ocean to counter the menace of piracy. India and France in 2018 signed the logistic agreement for equal access to each other’s military facilities. This agreement has expanded to include India’s naval operations in the Western Indian Ocean. Referring to this key partnership between India and France, Prime Minister Modi observed, “*Today in the 21st century, we talk of INFRA. I would like to say that for me it is IN+FRA, which means the alliance between India and France.*”¹⁰

From a geostrategic and geoeconomics point of view, the WIO provides vast opportunities for India in strengthening its maritime security efforts in the region. The Mozambique Channel in the South-West of the Indian Ocean, regarded as the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean, is an important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). The region also has vast reserves of natural resources. The discovery of rare-earth metals, crude oil, and natural gas through deep-sea mining and excavation has made it a region with great potential. Therefore, India’s engagement with the WIO littoral states “*assumes great significance*”.¹¹ The African Indian Ocean littorals and India are members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). This regional maritime framework provides a greater opportunity for economic cooperation based on mutual benefits. In 2011, when India assumed the Chair of IORA, six priority areas of maritime cooperation

were identified. The objective was to evolve IORA as a regional maritime security framework to address threats emanating from conventional as well as non-conventional sources. The priorities also included cooperation in areas of fisheries management, disaster management, tourism, science, technology, and cultural exchanges. Along with IORA, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) also contributes to India's close cooperation with the African coastal littorals. India enjoys observer status to the Indian Ocean Commission (COI), and the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC).

Over the past decade, India has taken initiatives and made effort to improve its maritime operational capabilities. New Delhi's primary focus has been to build security partnerships with the IOR littoral states and to restrict Chinese influence. The Indian navy seeks to achieve strategic dominance over the important choke points in the WIOR, an important bargaining tool in the regional power game.¹² Also, to institutionalize its role as a leading maritime power in the region, India is actively engaged with its African littoral partners in improving its military capability, capacity building, training assistance, and HADR operations. This promotion of interoperability among the navies has been mentioned in the 2015 Indian Maritime Strategy Document titled "*Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*". It mentions that India has diversified its presence in the region through the regular exchange of defense officials, building capacity through training, transfer of naval hardware and logistical support, naval intelligence, joint military exercises and patrolling of seas, etc. India has been involved in conducting hydrographic surveys in Kenya, Mozambique, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Tanzania. Indian Navy was also the first to conduct anti-piracy patrols in the region (Gulf of Aden). A large volume of Indian trade flows through the Gulf of Aden. Indian patrols also take place in the Mozambique Channel. These patrolling naval vessels provide security to not just Indian commercial ships but to foreign consignments also. Reports suggest that no ship guarded by the Indian patrol has ever been hijacked. This Indian anti-piracy operation success has further cemented its role as a leading power in the regional security architecture. Increasing naval exercises between the Indian and African navies has fostered greater synergy and interoperability.

Politically, too, the visits by the Indian Prime Minister and foreign minister are an attempt to win the trust of these strategically important Indian Ocean African littoral states. An important outcome of such political engagement has been the signing of an MoU for the development of Agalega Island in Mauritius and Assumption Island of Seychelles.¹³ Both these islands are strategically important as two-third of global energy is traded through this region. This will help in consolidating India's strategic foothold in the region. In 2016, at Mauritius, Modi announced India's doctrine of SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) to promote cooperation with the littorals of the IOR and create a conducive environment of stability through maritime cooperation and economic development. The initiative also

includes collaboration in tourism, culture, and trade along with efforts toward achieving SDGs. Therefore, a close maritime partnership between India and the WIO littoral states is a win-win combination in the region.

But amidst these possibilities and efforts, India has failed to capitalize on its long political, diplomatic, and economic presence in the region. There is strong support for a proactive Indian security role in the WIOR among the littoral countries. Therefore, efforts must be made to collaborate with the partners in the region in congruence with the “*2050 African Integrated Maritime Strategy*”.¹⁴ India must also continue its HADR operations in the region as it did through ‘Operation Vanilla’ to support flood-affected Madagascar. Also, during the 2020 MV Wakashio oil spill off Mauritius, India provided 30 tons of technical equipment, and a 10-member coast guard team was dispatched to contain the oil spill. HADR and SAR efforts are the principal elements of India’s SAGAR initiative. These efforts will help to further consolidate India’s acceptance in the region as a responsible partner.

Importance of Mozambique Channel

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the importance of the Mozambique Channel as an important maritime chokepoint was put to challenge. Major powers like the US and its western allies were reluctant to accept the channel as an important transit route. But this unacceptance began to change with the excavation of coal and 125 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas in the Rovuma Basin¹⁵ and the recent blockage of the Suez Canal. From India’s strategic perspective, the Mozambique Channel is an important chokepoint in the WIOR. The 2015 Indian Maritime Strategy also considers it as an area of primary maritime interests. In terms of trade, India’s use of the Channel has been minimum but given its strategic importance, India has acted as a security provider.¹⁶ During the 2003 African Union (AU) and the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2004) summits held in Maputo, India took the responsibility of providing maritime security.¹⁷ In 2006, the defense cooperation agreement was signed by India and Mozambique which includes joint maritime patrols, supply of military equipment, training, and technology transfer in repairing and assembling military vehicles, aircraft, and ships.¹⁸ In 2020, the Indian navy has conducted a joint patrol from Reunion Island in the region with P-8I aircraft and French naval officers on board.¹⁹ The Mozambique Channel is an important area of Indo-French maritime cooperation. In addition to its monitoring station in Madagascar, India is also developing air and naval facilities in the Agalega island (Mauritius) near the north end of the Mozambique Channel.²⁰ India’s inclusion of Mauritius and Seychelles into its coastal radar network is further going to consolidate India’s strategic foothold in the region.

In the continent of Africa, Mozambique apart from South Africa is the only country with which India has a strategic partnership. India has been supportive of Mozambique’s fight

against terrorism and Islamic radicalism. Between India and Mozambique, there is an evolving defense partnership. India can also utilize Mozambique as the entry point to continental Africa. In 2020, after cyclone Idai affected the Southwestern Indian Ocean, India extended HADR to Mozambique. A large number of Indian public and private sector entities have invested in acquiring a stake in the Rovuma gas block. India's ONGC Videsh has a share of 20 percent while BPCL has a share of 10 percent in the Rovuma gas block.²¹ Mozambique can emerge as an alternative destination for India's energy security. Several Indian companies like SAIL, TATA, etc. have invested in the coal sector of Mozambique. Maputo is also important for India's food security. Between 2018-2019, India imported 228,000 tons of pulses from Mozambique. Therefore, the protection of the Channel from pirates and other criminals operating is a threat to the SLOCs in the WIOR.

The prevailing crisis in the waters of Mozambique calls for India's active security collaboration with the nation. Maputo has been welcoming of Indian presence to keep the vital assets in the Indian Ocean safe and to learn from India.²² India has already proved its efficiency in anti-piracy operations. This will help India establish itself as a net security provider. It is in India's interest to protect the Mozambique Channel from becoming another hotbed of global tensions.

“2-Ms” in India's Western Indian Ocean Policy

Indian WIO policy heavily relies on the ‘Two-M’ in the WIOR. Mauritius and the Maldives are central to the success of Indian efforts in the WIOR. India shares a strong socio-cultural bond with Mauritius and the Maldives. In recent years, India has stepped up its engagement with both these countries to enhance its maritime security, strategic, and economic interests in the region.

Mauritius

India shares a close political, economic, and security partnership with Mauritius. In 2015, when Modi visited the island nation, he complemented Mauritius as a “*key leader for a secure and sustainable future for the Indian Ocean.*”²³ A large chunk of the Mauritian population is of Indian origin. Even the current Mauritian Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth has family roots in India. A bulk of foreign investment into India from the US, Europe, and other parts of the West is channeled through the waters of Mauritius. Describing this close partnership, former Mauritian Prime Minister Paul Bérenger called it “*umbilical and sacred*” and security relations as “*intense*”.²⁴ Among the political elites of Mauritius, there is special regard for India as a security partner. This bonhomie was further cemented by the visit of India's EAM Jaishankar in February 2021. During the visit, India and Mauritius signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement' (CECPA). There has also a growing synergy between

the two countries in the health sector. This synergy got strengthened during the ongoing pandemic. India provided the island nation with 200,000 doses of vaccines to fight the menace of COVID-19. Earlier, immediately after the outbreak of the virus, India sent a team of medical experts and 23 tons of essential medicines, half a million tablets of hydroxychloroquine to help the WIO littoral state. This cooperation is part of India's SAGAR doctrine.

Following the signing of the defense agreement in 1974, India provided patrol vessels and helicopters to Mauritius. The Indian Armed Forces and Coast Guard provided training to the Mauritian Police Helicopter Squadron, Mauritian Army, and the National Coast Guard. The Indian Navy has been actively involved in conducting anti-piracy operations in the Mauritian waters since 2003.²⁵ The Mauritian political class is welcoming of India setting up a Naval base if they consider doing so.²⁶ Some reports suggested that India wanted to take on lease the Agalega islands and develop its airstrip for manned and unmanned air surveillance operations in the region.²⁷ During the recent visit by EAM Jaishankar two agreements were signed related to the transfer of Dornier aircraft and an Advanced Light Helicopter, Dhruv.²⁸ Also, an US\$ 100 million credit line was provided for the procurement of defense equipment by Mauritius. India has also helped Mauritius in the development of the Coastal Surveillance Radar System. This contributes to the maritime domain awareness of both countries. To further cement the partnership, India has hosted the first India-Africa Defence Ministers Conclave in 2020 and India-IOR Defence Ministers Conclave in February 2021. The IORA and the IONS provide an opportunity for both countries to engage on a multilateral platform with like-minded countries. But as China continues to make inroads into the WIOR, India needs to boost up its engagement with these littoral states by catering to their demands.

Maldives

Diplomatic relations with the Maldives began with the opening of the Indian High Commission in Male in 1982. Since then, the relationship has been cemented through regular exchanges of leaders at both bilateral and multilateral levels. The roots of the relationship are cemented in – *“maintenance of cultural and historical relations, trade and economic access, and finally, security interests, including the safeguarding of critical sea lines of communication.”*²⁹ The relationship witnessed its first major strategic progress when the Maldives was victimized by a coup by Tamil infiltrators belonging to the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). The Indian Air Force was rushed in under the much-celebrated “Operation Cactus” to contain the threat and restore democracy, making India a dependable ally for the Island country. Also, during the 2004 Tsunami, India despite suffering casualties and devastation supported its junior partner with relief and medical assistance. In 2008 When President Nasheed of the Maldives assumed office, greater co-operations were finalized in the fields of defense and security of the Island nation. India has made large-scale investments in the

development of infrastructure and security of the nation. Frequent ministerial-level visits have also contributed to boosting the relationship. For India, the Island country holds great geostrategic and geopolitical interests.

India has also supported the Island nation by providing humanitarian assistance to the latter's times of crisis. Beginning with the 2004 Asian Tsunami crisis, the recent global pandemic of Covid-19 marked no difference in India's humanitarian support towards its junior partner by providing HADR. Thus, India has emerged as a dependable and trusted ally of the Maldives.³⁰ The Indian Prime Minister regarded the Maldives as a valued partner with whom India has shared strategic, economic, and development goals. In 2016, President Yameen too stressed the "India First policy". During the 6th round of the Joint Commission Meeting (2019), attended by the Foreign Minister of both nations, the emphasis was laid on maritime security including anti-piracy operations, controlling drug trafficking, and reviewing other areas of cooperation.

Since 2011 Chinese influence over the Maldives has increased significantly. The tenures of Waheed and Yameen were highly responsible for growing ties with China which didn't have even a diplomatic mission in the Maldives until 2011. For both India and China, the Maldives can be an important naval and airbase for securing major SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. The Maldives location between the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Hormuz, which are important chokepoints adds to its strategic importance. For India, the Indian sub-continent is its backyard and any move by its neighbors towards any external power is seen with suspicion by the security establishments in New Delhi. Most of India's energy imports from the Gulf and African countries are channeled through the IOR, therefore, a close strategic partnership with the Maldives provides India with the opportunity to use the deep seaports for safeguarding its interest and providing security to its vital SLOCs. In 2006, rumors spread about Male leasing an island to Beijing.³¹ India also ramped up its defense cooperation by providing the Maldives with attack aircraft for maritime security and setting up radar systems for surveillance of the atolls. Since 2009, the Indian Navy Southern command has been patrolling to secure the atolls of Maldives, bringing the archipelago nation within the Indian security purview. Both the countries also signed agreements to station two DHRUV light helicopters for security assistance of the Maldives. Defense cooperation also included training of MNDF in India, the supply of equipment, and joint military drills to enhance maritime security and anti-piracy surveillance. The Coast Guards of both India and Maldives regularly hold joint drills code-named "DOSTI" since 1991. A composite training facility and a coastal surveillance radar system for the MNDF in Maafilefushi were set up by India. Therefore, India is one of the key security providers to the Island nation and is expected to heighten such cooperation in days to come owing to its broader strategic and economic interests in the IOR.

Conclusion

In its aspiration to emerge as a great power, the IOR is a critical component of India's strategic calculus. Also, with an increasing domestic requirement of energy resources, much of which is imported from West Asia and the Gulf through the maritime trade routes, India will continue to make efforts to expand its influence throughout the IOR.³² Over the last two decades, this understanding has gained prominence in India's strategic thinking. The rise of India's maritime predominance in the IOR will further integrate the region and in "*long-term result will be a more prosperous and globally more influential region.*"³³ Since 2010, with an increase in India's naval capabilities, there has been a significant rise in India's security engagement with the countries of the Indian Ocean. The main aim was to engage with states that are close to the major chokepoints in the IOR.

This understanding has been the reason behind India's enhanced cooperation with the WIOR littorals. As a big partner with greater security capabilities, most of these smaller nations happily accepted India as a security provider. Some of them like Mauritius and the Maldives have considered India as a security guarantor. But in effect, there remains shakiness in India's strategic posturing in the region. These littorals are subjected to both natural and man-made threats; therefore, they increasingly look for partners to maintain maritime order, addressing security challenges, and tackling ecological concerns. Therefore, countries with greater maritime capabilities like India need to cooperate with these smaller states towards maintaining a maritime order.³⁴

In a situation where the Chinese, through its Maritime Silk Route Initiative is making deeper inroads into India's strategic backyard and engaging with the littoral states of the IOR, has been a cause of concern for India. The long presence of the PLA(N) in the IOR can put to challenge India's freedom of navigation and importantly its locational advantage in the IOR. Therefore, continuous engagement with the island nations holds the key. India's hard-earned goodwill through its peacekeeping missions and close defense ties will contribute greater momentum in sustaining close partnership with the African continent. Together with the African littorals, India must identify the immediate priorities in the region. India can also engage with other like-minded partner states for the development of the region. Cooperation in the field of security between India and France can be a model for this purpose. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor initiative by India and Japan needs to be actualized towards sustainable development of the region. This initiative can also include partners like Australia, Singapore, France, and others who share the common vision of "Free and Open" Indo-Pacific. India needs to adopt multi-pronged strategies in the emerging competitive geopolitical WIOR. These strategies, moving beyond the security dimension, should involve cooperation in areas like the blue economy, industrial development, maritime research, climate and weather concerns, etc.

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