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India - France Synergies in the Vanilla Islands

Kshipra Vasudeo*

Abstract

The relations between India and France have been continually evolving and a new alliance between India and France has emerged in the Vanilla Islands. After years of neglect, the region is now vital for the major powers, which include the US, UK, China, Japan and India. The Vanilla Islands are strategically located at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and South Asia. This enables the central littoral governments to project strength and enhance their status as net security providers in the area. In such a geopolitical context, India and France have agreed to increase collaboration in the Indian Ocean, which might benefit a critical Indian Ocean sub-region, viz. the Vanilla Islands. This paper discusses the new developments in the context of the India-France strategic Synergies in the Vanilla Islands and reflects on their geopolitical implications in near future.

Keywords: India, France, strategic co-operation, Vanilla Islands, Indian Ocean.

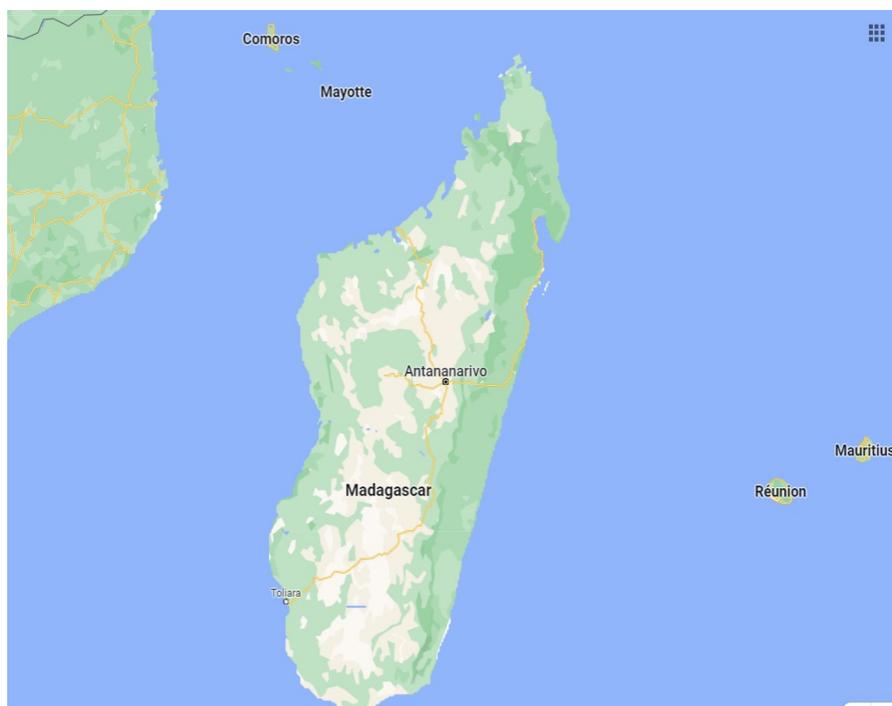


Introduction

The Vanilla Islands have emerged as an area of geo-strategic significance in global politics in recent decades. These are a collection of islands in the south-western Indian

Ocean, which includes the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Réunion, and Seychelles. The name “Vanilla” is used to refer to them collectively since these nations are well-known for exporting the flavouring substance, vanilla. The Vanilla Islands group is surrounded

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VANILLA ISLANDS

by marine chokepoints and heavily travelled Sea Lines of communication (SLOCs), enhancing its strategic significance.

The colonial expansion of France into the Indian Ocean, where it extended its rule over several islands in the area, marks a crucial phase in the history of French imperialism (Maupin, 2017, p. 42). Long after decolonisation, France retains its strategic interest and presence in the Indian Ocean region. France has shared interest with India in the western Indian Ocean (WIO). The addition of France as an official

member in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (17 December 2020) was welcomed by India. IORA systematically examines Indo-French synergy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo-Pacific region, which have become crucial regions in a changing geopolitical environment.

Historically, the two nations have had close military connections; their bond may now become more robust as a result of this new military collaboration. There is an increasing synergy between India and France in the Vanilla Islands. Halder (2022)

has noted that even though France governs many overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans, the Réunion Islands have been receiving much attention from France due to their strategic position in the Indo-Pacific region. As a significant global force moving towards the Indian Ocean, France's changing regional strategic milieu is critical (Halder, 2022; pp.1-3), as is India's role as one of the primary regional advocates for the Indo-Pacific narrative in the IOR. With France becoming a part of the IOR's strategic environment, it becomes critical to understand the Indo-French dynamics in the broader matrix of the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific is a maritime and geographical region which has been defined by the interactions between India, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia, which serve as the strategic centres of gravity of the region. It is home to 60 per cent of the world's population and a third of global trade. Consequently, it faces various kinds of challenges, from climate change to terrorism. Due to its geopolitical significance, any crisis or unrest in this region would have a direct impact on global powers such as France and Europe. In fact, France is at the frontlines of the worldwide war against terrorism in African theatres of operations (Guitton et.al, 2019). In addition,

France has maintained a substantial naval presence in maritime Asia, especially in the IOR, since the 18th and 19th centuries. Hence, the Indian Ocean has not been considered a foreign territory in French strategic thinking for centuries (Braun, 1983).

As a result of its history as a colonized region, India has had a long-standing relationship with the European powers. However, after the Second World War the European powers reduced their engagement with the region, and India shifted the focus of her foreign policy towards non-alignment. In the 21st century, in the post-Cold War context, India, France, and the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) countries have become more mindful of maritime security in the region primarily because of the expansion of China into the Indian Ocean and the growing strategic importance US has accorded to the region with emphasis on the Indo-Pacific.

Napoleon had once said, "China is a sleeping giant. Let her lie and sleep, for when she awakens, she will astonish the world". In the 21st century, this sleeping giant is wide awake. The world is witnessing a shift in the center of political and economic power from the US towards China (Lee, 2007). France and India have turned to each other for support

in this changing scenario. The heads of state of both these countries have reaffirmed their shared vision for the Indo-Pacific region on different occasions, indicating that the Indo-French 'strategic embrace in the Indo-Pacific is set to intensify' (Talukdar, 2021).

Maritime security co-operation is a key part of the India-France strategic relationship. The current political leaders of India and France are committed to enhancing Indo-French cooperation to strengthen security in the IOR (Pandey, 2019). France has military bases in the Indian Ocean, like on La Réunion, Mayotte, and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands. In 2018, India and France struck a military logistics agreement granting reciprocal access to one another's military installations. With this deal in place, it is anticipated that India will further expand its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. This will strengthen India's naval capabilities, particularly in the western Indian Ocean. Additionally, this agreement will provide India with increased access to the resources of the Indian Ocean (Rajagopalan, 2021).

The objective of this paper is to examine the following questions: a) Why are the Vanilla Islands of significance to India and France?; b)

How have India-France synergies evolved in the Vanilla Islands?; and c) How are the Vanilla Islands responding to the India-France cooperation in the region in light of its troubles relating to rising terrorism and illegal trafficking in the region?

This paper has been divided into the following sections to discuss these questions. The first section discusses why the Vanilla Islands are of significance to India and France. The next section focusses on India's growing presence in the Vanilla Islands. The third section looks at the French presence in south-west Indian Ocean. The fourth section elaborates upon the geopolitical context of the Vanilla Islands, following which the converging maritime strategic interests in the Vanilla Islands have been discussed. The next section talks about the prospects of India-France co-operation in the Vanilla Islands. The final section before the conclusion deals with African perspectives towards geopolitical cooperation and understanding in the Indian Ocean.

Significance of the Vanilla Islands for India and France

India has begun to look at the Vanilla Islands from a very strategic

and militaristic point of view in recent years. These Islands have provided India with a strategic reason to form new diplomatic relations with France. After a lengthy period of neglect, these forgotten regions have developed their own strategic significance for the current global politics. The Vanilla Island nations are considered valuable because of their strategic position at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and South Asia. This is critical because it enables the large littoral nations to project strength independently and enhance their profiles as suppliers of net security in the region by permitting their navy to maintain a continuous presence along vital international commerce routes and critical Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) (Kathayat, 2020). Vessels transporting goods and oil from Africa and beyond to China transit the chokepoints and SLOCs close to the Vanilla Islands, making these nodes and routes strategic for China. The area has a large Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) for commerce and is an entry point into Africa. Every superpower today wants to expand its influence over Africa to protect its massive lobby and support in the UN. The SLOCs and energy commerce with Africa are important for China to enhance her influence in the area. Apart from that, China's ambition is to become a major

regional and global influence both economically and politically.

The Mozambique Channel is an important channel for trade for France and India. It is also of geopolitical interest to these nations; these sea lines need to be secured to secure their influence in the region and enable them to become regional powers. France's interests in the Indo-Pacific region depends on the large EEZ it controls in the area, which includes the islands it owns, its overseas assets, and its military presence (Halder, 2022, p. 5). France's goal in the Indian Ocean is to make herself known as a significant player; at present, much of France's strategy is aimed at both sustaining and enhancing its power in the Indian Ocean. The Vanilla Islands are not only crucial for the strategic interests of India and France; they also provide alternatives for regional security to the island countries and a chance for them to act as balancers for major powers. However, France remains the main power in the region because of the cultural and economic influence it holds over the region.

From the African perspective, given their influence over the region and the new alliances they have been forging with non-African countries, the southwest Indian Ocean is fast becoming a geopolitical hot spot. It is

also crucial for the security and development of Africa (Walker & Reva, 2021). The African Union (AU) and African governments' attempts to address the issue of maritime instability in the region did not always address the concerns of the Vanilla Islands. As a result, these small island nations have had to fight the maritime dangers largely on their own. Moreover, the lack of cooperation from the African countries has been taken to signify that Africa does not value their contributions and concerns. Hence, they have focused on strengthening their connections with non-African nations.

However, this may soon change. Recent developments have shown that these island nations are significant partners in their regional efforts to combat marine organized crime. In addition, active international cooperation, notably in finance, has aided these continuing efforts. This development has taken place due to two factors. Firstly, no one nation can solve maritime issues alone. Since these dangers are global, international law enforcement collaboration, information sharing, and coordination is required amongst the interested stakeholders. Seychelles and Mauritius have established credible focal centres to combat international piracy together.

Secondly, since island governments have limited resources, their alliances help to reduce the cost of obtaining maritime threat capability and means (Chelin & Reva, 2021).

India's growing presence in the Vanilla Islands

India has a massive plan for expanding its maritime influence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Firstly, India is trying to become a significant power and compete with China for power in the IOR. There are three places where the Indian Ocean presents its importance to the world: the Malacca Straits, the Persian Gulf, and southern Africa. Therefore, India has paid much attention to developing her relationships in these three places (Brewster, 2010). To extend its influence over China's growing economic and diplomatic clout in the IOR, India's government has sought to expand its reach into the region's island nations.

India's rising interest in and influence on the Vanilla Islands is noticeable. Previously, India's primary concern was the South Asian neighbourhood, specifically the SAARC countries. In 2015, Prime Minister Modi presented his vision titled Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) in Mauritius. The 2018 visit of Indian President

Ram Nath Kovind to Madagascar was followed by the 2019 visit of Indian Vice President Venkaiah Naidu to Comoros. In November 2020, Dr. S. Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, visited Seychelles.

India has thus established contact with many of the island republics. These island countries have established themselves as unique partners of India by pioneering the "Blue Economy" initiative. Their large numbers have an effect on the voting patterns in a variety of global fora, making them nations of significance for India. 'We cannot afford to be weak at sea,' the first PM of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, had once remarked. Whoever controls the Indian Ocean controls both, India's seaborne trade as well as sovereignty, according to many observers (Raina, 2014).

In 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron visited India. The heads of state of both the countries praised the "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region" as a road map for expanding their bilateral relations. The two nations expressed their vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and maritime security gained traction in the Indo-French strategic alliance (Halder, 2022). President Macron also invited

India to a summit meeting with the leaders of the island governments in the south-western Indian Ocean with the vision that the unexplored synergies between India and France might help both countries secure their own interests while boosting public benefits in this key Indian Ocean sub-region. France formally joined the Indian Ocean Rim Association on 17 December 2020, indicating her intention to have a more active presence in the Indo-Pacific area.

The connection between India and the Vanilla Islands, both militarily and strategically, must be investigated further. According to sources, a significant development project involving US\$87 million is now underway in the Islands. This investment in Mauritius would serve as a dramatic setting and launching point for India's new P81 Fleet, which has been built against the background of the country's recent participation in an unprecedented joint patrol with France from Réunion Island. In addition, several activities have come to light which provide legitimate grounds to oppose China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean (Raisina House, 2021). India has opted to view the strategic significance of these islands from both an individual and a communal perspective, notwithstanding the apparent significance of the Vanilla

Islands (as seen from India's active participation in the Quad group). India wants to show that it is a major security provider in the IOR, that it is a maritime country with a lot of economic and military power. India has done this by using its long-standing relationships with the coastal nations of the area to offer them adequate military training, defence equipment, and security advisors (Das, 2019).

The French presence in south-west Indian Ocean

France has colonized every island society in south-west Indian Ocean at one point or another. Mauritius had a significant position in the 17th and 18th centuries since it was a port in the maritime routes from Europe to India and the Far East. Mauritius (Ile de France), Réunion (Ile Bourbon), and Seychelles (from 1756) were all under French sovereignty throughout the 18th century. Réunion was restored to France in 1815 after having been occupied by Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. However, the French language and culture remained strong in both Mauritius and the Seychelles. In 1896, Madagascar was colonized by France. In the Comoros, France gained Mayotte in 1841, and the

other three islands became protectorates in 1886 (Derek, 2008).

In the current geopolitical climate, the international order is collapsing due to the strategic struggle between China and the United States as well as the actions of some of the regional players in the IOR. Concurrently, global issues call for more state collaboration. The chances of an uncontrolled rise in violence are very high in this region, which does not have the required crisis management tools. To keep up with its international commitments, France works for a multilateral world order built on the rule of law (France Diplomacy, 2020b, p. 10).

After the United States, France has the second-largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Indian Ocean and internationally. Réunion Island has played a crucial role in helping France acquire resident power status in the Indian Ocean. Based on Réunion Island alone, France became a full member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2021. Notably, France (or rather, Reunion Island) has been a member of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), a regional

network, since 1986, due to 'its rich history, economic and commercial exchanges, and personal relationships' with the region's states (France Diplomacy, 2020b).

Besides India, France is the other major power in the Indian Ocean that has pushed for the Indo-Pacific alliance. India and France are becoming increasingly like-minded partners, which makes it important to take a look at how the two countries have been working together in the region. With France becoming more active as an Indo-Pacific power in the Indian Ocean, the two countries are likely to work together even more closely in the future.

The geopolitical context of the Vanilla Islands

Geopolitics is the study of foreign policy using geographical variables to comprehend, justify, and predict international political behaviour. Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) was a frequent commentator on international naval strategy and diplomacy. Mahan believed that national greatness was inexorably linked to the sea – more specifically, its economic usage in peacetime and its control during wartime. Mahan drew his theoretical foundation from Antoine-Henri Jomini, who stressed

the importance of strategic sites (such as choke points, canals, and shipbuilding stations) and measurable levels of combat capability in a fleet in achieving sea hegemony. He identified six requirements for a country to possess maritime power. Mahan stated that,

Notwithstanding all the familiar and unfamiliar dangers of the sea, both travel and traffic by water have always been easier and cheaper than by land' (The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783).

Mahan's theories regarding the importance of sea power in islands remain consistent to this day, but they have been supplemented by various modifications over the years. These alterations are triangular in nature. Several of these pertain to militaristic concerns: the transition from coal to oil and nuclear power, the introduction of aircraft carriers and submarines, and the development of missiles and air power. Several are technological in nature, such as the states' capacity to physically shape and build new islands in the Indo-Pacific. Several are legal, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which has increased the importance of exclusive economic

zones in the Indo-Pacific region. Unlike many other forms of nissology (the study of islands), which focus on subaltern and post-colonial studies, this study examines how large powers exploit small islands in the Indo-Pacific region (Scott, 2021).

The European nations have ruled over the Indian Ocean islands until the 19th century. Now, other powers such as China, Japan, and India have started asserting their maritime influence and power in the Indian Ocean and cooperating with ex-colonial European powers like France, Germany, and Britain. In this context, India has been enhancing its quality of cooperation with France in the Vanilla Islands to counter the rise of China in the south-western Indian Ocean. Moreover, France has been well-aware of the importance of sea-power in global politics since colonial times. Now, it is rejuvenating her strength in the region in this respect with strong cooperation from regional powers like India.

Converging Maritime Strategic Interests in the Vanilla Islands

India and France have been strategic allies since 1998. Defence, space, and civil nuclear cooperation have historically been the focal points

of bilateral ties. However, maritime cooperation is becoming an increasingly important component of Indo-French ties as both nations seek to explore means of enhancing maritime security cooperation. The establishment of bilateral maritime dialogue between India and France in 2015 was a significant advance in this direction. The latest dialogue between the nations was conducted in New Delhi in 2017, where a White Shipping Agreement was signed between the two nations. The Agreement will provide for the surveillance of vessels across the area, share data on maritime traffic, and improve marine domain awareness (Pandey, 2019).

According to C. Raja Mohan and Baruah, there are several reasons for France and India to collaborate in the IOR. Firstly, India's institutional concerns are likely to be less than those of France, a medium-sized nation with much less political weight than the US. Secondly, France has been attempting to strengthen regional security ties with a number of Asian countries. For example, French President Macron decided to engage China in a discussion about African security issues in early 2018. Paris has also stepped up security talks with Tokyo. Most significantly, as a rising power like China presents a more uncertain

geopolitical environment, both India and France are looking to bolster their security relationships to maintain their geopolitical prominence.

The current diplomatic relations between France and India began in the 1980s, when India promoted non-alignment, South-South co-operation, and anti-colonial and anti-imperial initiatives. After the Second World War and the Cold War, India's foreign policy needed to focus on protecting its geostrategic interests from the emerging states and former colonial powers. Due to the long history that India and France have shared in this region, they decided to join hands and become strategic partners.

Thus, France became a major high-tech partner, helping India develop heavy water production, nuclear fast breeder reactors, and rockets with strong liquid-fuel engines. A major defence partner in the early 1980s, when India sought to diversify its military hardware suppliers and decrease its dependence on the USSR, France has supplied Mirage fighter aircrafts, Scorpene submarines, and Rafale fighter jets to India. The increasing focus of France on Asia comes from its belief, as stated in the 2008 French Defence White Paper that 'by 2025,

Asia will be a major global centre alongside Europe and America. New powers like China and India would have emerged.' France's recognition of Asia's future is apparent from its diplomatic efforts in the subcontinent, especially in its outreach to India (Gireesh, 2020).

Indian Prime Minister Modi's increased political involvement in south-western Indian Ocean, along with French President Macron's strong interest in a regional security alliance with Delhi, have improved the possibility of their strategic collaboration in the Vanilla Islands. With regard to maritime security, New Delhi aggressively aims to expand its strategic relationships, particularly with Paris. Indo-Pacific regional cooperation has been a priority for India and France since 1998.

However, both Modi and Macron seem keen to expand their strategic influence in response to the growing geopolitical instability and the increasingly aggressive naval exercises in the IOR. Since Macron's election victory in 2017, New Delhi and Paris have conducted a series of high-level meetings to discuss the possibility of expanding their maritime security co-operation. Regardless of the initial intention, the effects may be far-reaching. By

strengthening their co-operation, India may move away from its history of nonalignment and military isolation, and toward coalition formation with other countries (Mohan & Baruah, 2018).

Both the countries want to strengthen their security relations as these “middle powers” face an uncertain geopolitical environment. India’s trade with France has grown consistently over the last decade, and has reached \$13.83 billion in 2022. Both parties have recognized the need to accelerate talks on an India-EU trade and investment agreement (Roche, 2020).

The strategic value of the Vanilla Islands extends beyond merely the growth and export of vanilla. Their location is ideal for trade between Africa, the southern oceans, the Middle East, and East Asia. Apart from the Vanilla Islands, all routes between Europe and the Indian Ocean pass via Africa. All the main European nations have held these islands in the late 15th century. In the 18th century, France ruled over the Vanilla Islands after the Napoleonic Wars concluded in 1815. Eventually, the Suez Canal reduced the need for European ships to circumnavigate Africa. The importance of SLOCs and Vanilla Islands have re-emerged in recent times as Asian nations like

China, Japan, and India began to look for resources in Africa (Raja Mohan, 2019).

The India-France cooperation in the Indian Ocean appears paradoxical in some ways. In the Vanilla Islands, France dominated the other European powers in the 18th century, while in Mauritius and Seychelles, Prime Minister Modi launched the SAGAR Indian Ocean Strategy in 2015. Their joint strategic vision for bilateral maritime cooperation in the region has also been put forth, which is a shift from India’s traditional foreign policy where it avoided co-operating with “extra-regional nations”.

Macron upped the stakes by inviting the Indian leadership to a summit of Vanilla Island leaders in October 2019 in Réunion. It was decided there that France and India would work together to preserve the marine ecosystems of the island countries and stand against hegemonic intrusions into the littoral nations. India used to be a “lone ranger” in the Indian Ocean. By proposing a regional collaboration with India, France has broken the long-standing tradition of reserving French control over the Vanilla Islands. As a result of this, India is increasingly seeking productive strategic partnerships with other

Indian Ocean countries (Mohan, 2019). In 2018, President Macron proposed a new strategic alliance with Australia and India, and sought to secure ties with Japan to counter Beijing's regional ambitions. 'The era of European naiveté towards China is over,' Macron told the European Council in March (Godbole, 2019).

The Indo-Pacific region is gradually becoming a geopolitically disputed zone, and New Delhi and Paris recognise that to protect their long-standing interests in the littoral zone, they need to work together more closely. France has facilitated India's official entrance into the Indian Ocean's south-west; India joined the Francophone Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) in March 2020. The Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion, and Seychelles have been part of the IOC since 1982. France controls over 90 per cent of its large EEZ (approx. nine million sq. km.) and has 7,000 troops stationed there. Its Indo-Pacific FDI surpasses US\$ 176 billion.

In the western Indian Ocean and the South Pacific regions, France has had long-standing military and commercial relations with Djibouti (Mohan & Baruah, 2018). During Phase 2 of the 17th Varuna, the Indo-France naval exercises, two fleets conducted VBSS (Visit, Board, Search,

and Seizure) operations off the coast of Djibouti, which is home to French, US, and Chinese military bases. China, Malta, the EU, and the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie) are the Commission Observers in the region (Mittal, 2021). Hence, these regions should also be considered for an OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie) membership due to their status as sites of French colonial heritage.

Meanwhile, for China, the significance of Brazil, South Africa, and the rest of Africa as suppliers of commodities and energy is growing; ships bound for China pass via the choke points and SLOCs of the Vanilla Islands. Consequently, such choke points and SLOCs become more important in India's strategic assessment. Consumed by post-war debt, the European powers could no longer afford the required resources to keep control over their African colonies. The rise of new powers like China and India gave a new alternative for financial support and security for small African countries.

'India dominates only the Indian Ocean,' says Brewster. To create an implicit threat of interdiction to China's maritime lines of communication, the Indian Navy (IN) has developed their naval

capabilities around its Indian Ocean chokepoints. The Vanilla Islands' chokepoints and SLOCs have become new pressure points for China due to the amount of maritime traffic delivering commodities and oil to China. Brazil supplies a lot of iron ore to China's steel sector. Brazil's April 2020 exports to China rose 103 per cent annually to 16.393 million tonnes. This is especially important given the ongoing trade war between China and Australia. Sources report that Chinese importers were summoned and told to stop buying Australian goods. In 2011, China imported 1.23 million barrels of crude oil from Africa, or about 20 per cent of the total crude oil imports. By September 2020, the percentage had dropped to about 18 per cent, but remained significant nonetheless. As East Africa becomes a hydrocarbon hub, critical energy maritime traffic in and around the Mozambique Channel will increase. India's strategy is to grab hold of these fresh opportunities and expand its influence.

In the Indian Navy Chief's visit to Paris in 2017, the French Defence Minister's visit to Delhi and the reciprocal foreign minister visits in 2018, the Indian Ocean has been a critical topic of conversation. India and France agreed on a Joint Strategic Vision for Indo-French Co-operation

in the Indian Ocean Region in March 2018. The vision document highlighted the shared concerns of the two democracies with regard to emerging challenges in the IOR such as maritime traffic security, terrorism, piracy (especially in the Horn of Africa), international law enforcement, an organized crime such as trafficking and illegal fishing (IUUs), climate change, environmental protection, and natural resource protection (MEA, 2021).

On 22 August 2019, President Macron and Prime Minister Modi met in Paris for the 45th G7 conference. Following the bilateral meetings, a MoU was signed for Joint Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean between Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and National Centre for Space Studies (CNES), France. (It followed an earlier MoU signed in March 2018 between ISRO and CNES to co-develop an Indian Ocean maritime surveillance satellite system. These agreements have advanced India-France maritime security co-operation in the IOR.

Both countries have reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing collaboration in the IOR and their readiness to collaborate with other like-minded nations via trilateral

conversations. An agreement on ensuring mutual logistical assistance for the Indian and French military forces was also reached (PIB, 2021), which would enable greater military cooperation in the Indian Ocean. In January 2019, this agreement was operationalized with the French Navy's anti-aircraft destroyer FNS Cassard setting anchor at the dockyard in Mumbai.

The prospects of India-France co-operation in the Vanilla Islands

The recent developments in the India-France diplomatic relations are in stark contrast with the foreign policy adopted by India until the 1980s, which resisted the prospect of working with "extra-regional powers". In fact, India's declaration policy included a demand that Western countries withdraw their military presence from the Indian Ocean. For example, in 2016, Modi's administration signed the long-awaited Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US, allowing both countries access to each other's army facilities. As a result, the Indian approach now included interoperability with the US. Given its success with the US, India rushed to sign a similar deal with France during Macron's March 2018 visit

along idea "Joint Strategic Vision" for marine cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Macron recommended a three-pronged goal for collaboration between Delhi and Paris, which included marine domain awareness, preserving the delicate maritime environment of the island nations, and preventing hegemonic encroachment into the littoral zones.

India's strong relations with Mauritius are based on her consideration of the island as a hub for its large diaspora in the island country. Delhi has also recently adopted a strategic view of Mauritius and Seychelles, and has started to pay attention to Madagascar and Comoros. More importantly, Delhi now sees the Vanilla Islands as a strategic space. France has abandoned its long-standing claim to the Vanilla Islands as its strategic preserve, by proposing a regional alliance with India. For along time, India was the "lone ranger" in the Indian Ocean. To be effective in the Indian Ocean, Delhi's maritime alliance with Paris underlined a particular requirement (Rajamohan, 2019) i.e., the collaboration would be critical to maintaining peace and stability in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific region (Borah, 2020).

India and France use the blue economy to advance their

civilizations while protecting the environment and marine life. Both countries would like to contribute to scientific research and ocean conservation while maintaining the ocean as a global common zone, a place of freedom and trade. The conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources is the goal no. 14 of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda. As a result, they intend to act following international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the International Maritime Organization's first strategy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from ships. They advocate the observance of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) (MEA, 2022).

The French Ambassador to India, Emmanuel Lenain, underlined this opinion on the eve of the 4th Indo-French Maritime Security Dialogue, which saw the permanent installation of a liaison officer at the IFC-IOR in December 2019 and of co-operative patrols in southern Indian Ocean with India by early 2020. Both these initiatives augur well for the strengthening of the India-France cooperation (Godbole, 2019). The India-France collaboration concentrates on port development, blue economy, commerce, connectivity,

tourism, skill development, hospitality, and healthcare in this resource-rich area. In addition, India is also interested in the gas reserves near the Vanilla Islands in the Mozambique Channel (Chaudhary, 2019). Moreover, in 2019, the leaders of India, France, and the Vanilla Islands (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Seychelles) in the Western Indian Ocean participated in a "Choose La Reunion" business meeting. This meeting demonstrates India and France's proactive engagement in the Vanilla nations for future strategic and economic growth in the region. The Choose La Reunion meeting was a momentous occasion, bringing together the leaders of four countries to discuss strategies for mutual development in the region.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with its military involvement and immense economic impact in the region, has become a major cause for concern in the Western Indian Ocean littoral countries as well as for India and France's geo-economic and geopolitical interests. Both traditional and non-traditional security concerns exist in this context. The marine ecosystems of the WIO countries are their most valuable assets. Hence, this strategic partnership and cooperation will benefit the economies of the WIO nations.

While defending India's security in the Indian Ocean, France would also be able to sustain her legacy in the area due to this partnership. France, being the historically dominant power and India as the emerging power, has a great capacity to come together and form a formidable partnership in the region.

African perspectives on geopolitical co-operation

Hartmann (1981) states that as international relations are becoming more "Oceanside", and oceanic regions are increasingly governing international relations, foreign policies, and domestic economic policies. The commercial, economic, and geopolitical objectives of industrialized capitalist states have shaped their understanding of international relations as the control of maritime routes and zones. In this framework, a series of bases are created in vital maritime zones and lanes to secure political supremacy in the littoral nations and their hinterlands. International issues and crises have grown increasingly regionalized and localized due to this process.

Reva (2021) reflects that in the context of the burgeoning Indo-French collaboration, the role of Africa in this developing geopolitical

area is uncertain, especially since most Indo-Pacific agendas seem to marginalize the continent. Unfortunately, African nations are not adequately equipped to deal with this practice, and have not yet formulated clearly stated foreign policy measures in response to it. The new seascape is crucial to ensure peace and security in Africa in the long run. Without a unified stance on the Indo-Pacific, governments in the region might fall victim to the manipulations and rivalries of the major powers, and Africa's attempts to co-operate with the countries in the Indian Ocean might be undermined due to the protracted strife and competitiveness in the region. Réunion and Mayotte are part of France's Indo-Pacific ambitions, but France's regional measures are not entirely linked with the ambitions of the African Union; they need more coordination. The growing bi-lateral Indo-Pacific operations threaten to disrupt African unity. As African governments strengthen connections, the region will avoid a rivalry between great powers.

It is important for Africa to gain the support of great powers such as France and India to counter the growing influence of China in the region. China has aggressively engaged the continent as part of the BRI, which the African governments

have profited from. China has financed, built, and operated 46 sub-Saharan African ports. Most regional policies aim to employ navies as foreign policy tools and cooperation anchors. France and the UK have dispatched ships to monitor the Indo-Pacific in the past year.

Meanwhile, Asia-Africa Growth Corridor Initiative by Japan and India in 2017 also aims to improve collaboration with Africa. This project's aims correspond with those of Agenda 2063, which is Africa's blueprint and master plan for converting the continent into the next global powerhouse. However, this initiative has not taken off well.

Conclusion

This paper argues that India and France, as resident powers in the Indian Ocean, have made tremendous strides in expressing a convergent and, in many ways, a shared vision for the Indo-Pacific region. As elaborated upon above, the position of France in the Indian Ocean merits a reassessment, notably by India, due to the existence of the Réunion Islands, which have gained substantial momentum as a strategic possession in recent years. Halder argues that,

In view of the growing geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian

Ocean has emerged as a crucial geopolitical arena. The strategic objective of France in the Indian Ocean is to be regarded as a significant regional force with global reach. India's strategic objectives in the area are connected to its aspiration to be a regional leader and to restrict China's rising footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). With France's admission to the IORA and its increased, in light of current circumstances, strategic emphasis on Réunion Island, it is crucial to examine the Indo-French bilateral dynamic in the context of the broader Indo-Pacific geopolitical context (Halder, 2022).

Both India and France have comparable geostrategic concerns in the Vanilla Islands, particularly due to their concerns regarding the Chinese influence. With India's help, France might explore the Indian Ocean further, thereby also enhancing India's vital interests in the Western Indian Ocean.

Considering France's strategic importance for India, it is essential that strong ties are established between the two nations. India has a 7,500kilometer coastline, over 1300 islands, and a two-million-square-kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone in the Indian Ocean. Its protection is,

therefore, vital to peace, security, and growth in the region. France, a country on the rim of the Indian Ocean, is active in this region. 1.6 million French people live in its overseas territories, and it has a 9.1 million square kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone in the Indo-Pacific region. India and France have shared concerns about freedom of navigation and over flight in the region and have the political will to address obstacles and fight the danger of weapons of mass destruction.

India's marine policy has evolved significantly since the Cold War. India has expressed its desire to work with like-minded nations in the area and is developing its naval and security partnerships around the IOR. The long-standing strategic alliance between India and France has definitely generated trust. In recent years, the complex relationship between the two democracies has improved in sectors such as defence, space, economics, and development. France might be an important partner for India, as it seeks to improve economic ties with France and grow in the IOR through mutual support and cooperation. It also aims to address piracy and counter-terrorism, with a special focus on the western and southern Indian Ocean, where France has a prominent presence. Since France is active in both the

Indian and Pacific Oceans, it may progressively become an important partner for India in the Indo-Pacific maritime traffic security in light of terrorist and piracy threats, particularly in the Horn of Africa. They will also ensure compliance with international law by all States, particularly freedom of navigation and over-flight, combat organized crime, trafficking (including WMD), smuggling, and illegal fishing (IUUs), and combat climate change.

India and France have the opportunity to safely navigate their shared interests in relation to island nations as well as the risks posed by both traditional and non-traditional challenges in the region. During the pandemic, both nations maintained excellent ties with each other. As the Indian foreign ministry stated, 'Both the ministers recognised the tremendous potential for greater co-operation across various areas such as trade and investment, defence and security, health, education, research and innovation, and energy and climate change' (Roche, 2021).

This new strategic orientation for India and France safeguards the interests of the two countries in the Mozambique Channel and nearby areas of strategic significance. However, economic trade between the two countries is being neglected; this

needs to be addressed as to ensure that the India-France collaboration expands in economic terms as well. Another significant point is that small African littoral countries do not respond substantially to maritime geopolitics and strategy because they still depend on the ex-colonial and rising powers. However, they have been engaging in regional and multilateral forums and expressing their needs. Moreover, they prefer to balance with great powers rather than reject them. In this context, India and France have both had old and new experiences in engaging with the Vanilla Islands, which would help them achieve greater expansion in the region. ■

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