

# China and Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Indian Interests

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*The cooperation between China and Francophone Western Indian Ocean region is now getting more visible, particularly after the China-Africa summit in November 2006. China's new thrust in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region was though framed within China's broader Africa policy, however there is indeed the centrality of maritime considerations. China seems to have a higher level of physical presence in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean's various island states than would be warranted by its present levels of trade and other economic activities. On the other hand, India enjoys strong political and security ties with Francophone Western Indian Ocean island states. However, India is anxious about the scale and intensity of the diplomatic and political energies that China seems to be devoting to the two island nations of the region, Seychelles and Mauritius. India's concerns are about China's strategic intentions underlying its high profile outreach to these two island states. This paper will explore Chinese interest and nature of involvement in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region and its implications for Indian interests in the region. It will also focus on the prospects for cooperation and conflict in the region.*

## Introduction

The Indian Ocean states at the eastern coast, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros and French territory Reunion comes under Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region. The term "Francophone" is generally used to denote those countries/ territories in this region where a substantial number of their population speak French. French culture is deeply rooted and distinctive in these countries/ territories. For centuries, the islands states such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Comoros, Reunion, Djibouti and Socotra have been critical links in the flow of goods and people across the Indian Ocean, from east and west and north and south. In the colonial era, they acquired a military significance amidst the efforts of European powers to control the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> France has historical and cultural links with the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands. Madagascar, Comoros and Reunion were the colonies of the French while Mauritius and Seychelles were

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occupied for some time by the French and retain their original French character. When the winds of nationalism were blowing across the Asian and African continent, four islands of this region, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros became independent. France maintained contacts with the others islands from Reunion. France continued to maintain her commercial, cultural and military infrastructure (French maintained the second largest naval presence in the Indian Ocean after the United States) in the region, which enables her to claim the status of an Indian Ocean state. The French image is centred in the Reunion, which has been developed into a significant base for the Frenchification of the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Reunion is a territory of France in the Indian Ocean and became an Overseas Department with the status of a region in 1974.<sup>3</sup> France has unique relationship with Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands, which is well reflected in its presence in the region making France a major player. France's strategic, defence and economic interest in Francophone Western Indian Ocean region is quite obvious and dependence and continuance of age-old ties of these Islands with France is also understandable. During the Cold War, the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands were at the very heart of American power projection into the region. Before it freed Mauritius in 1968 and began to withdraw from the East of Suez, Great Britain separated the island of Diego Garcia and handed it over to the United States. After the Cold War, Diego Garcia has been the pivot of United States naval operations in the Indian Ocean and the many wars it has fought in the Persian Gulf. Through the Cold War, the Soviet Union continually jockeyed for influence with occasional successes as in Seychelles. Many of these island states were fragile and were easy targets for not just great power intervention but also threatened by attacks by small mercenary groups.

The Francophone Western Indian Ocean Island nations Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros and Seychelles, have experienced a growth in democratic institutions and economic development and it has changed their relationships to outside powers. These Island states have tended to follow a non-aligned policy in their foreign relations and reflecting their lack of defence capabilities, have sought to promote the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, in which they include littoral states. However, after a relative decline in the military significance of the Francophone Western Indian Ocean territories since the end of the Cold War, the rise of China has once again put them back on the global geopolitical map. The recent trajectories of China and India strongly suggest that both states will play a more powerful role in the region in the coming decades. India remains concerned about China evolving role in the region. Thus, the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region has once again become an arena of increased diplomatic and military activity on the part of littoral states as well as external powers and characterized by growing strategic competition between them. Recent developments pose additional challenges of violence, terrorism and instability across the entire region. This paper will explore Chinese interest and nature of involvement in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region and its

implications for Indian interests in the region. It will also focus on the prospects for cooperation and conflict in the region.

## China's Strategic Interests in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region

China's growing influence in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region is sparked by its strong economy and strategic ambition. A rising China is today taking concrete steps to develop its maritime reach beyond its periphery. The 'String of Pearls' is an evolving maritime component of China's grand national strategy in the global security environment. It is more than a naval, military or a regional strategy. It describes the manifestation of China's rising geopolitical influence through efforts to increase access to ports and airfields, develop special diplomatic relationships, and modernize military forces that extend from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean and on to the Arabian Gulf. China has become more assertive in flexing its muscles across the Indian Ocean region.<sup>4</sup>

A rising China is today taking concrete steps to develop its maritime reach beyond its periphery. The 'String of Pearls' is an evolving maritime component of China's grand national strategy in the global security environment.

China has three overarching strategic concerns, regime survival, territorial integrity and domestic stability which are inexorably linked to its economy. Successful economic development is perceived as key to China's strategic concern of domestic stability. Chinese government is focused inward, and primarily domestic politics drive China's economic and foreign policies. Changes to the economic system and the decision to embrace globalization are causing major shifts in Chinese society. The regime's priority and preoccupation is to maintain domestic stability by fostering economic prosperity to satisfy the demands and expectations of the Chinese people. China's development, from its expanding economy and increased global influence to its growing military might and demand for energy, presents tremendous challenges as to manage the turmoil of massive structural, technological and social changes. China's greatest strength and its greatest vulnerability is the economy and therefore it is the centrepiece of Chinese policy and strategy. To sustain economic growth, China must rely increasingly upon external sources of energy and raw materials. SLOCs are vitally important because most of China's foreign trade is conducted by sea. Since energy provides the foundation of the economy, China's economic policy depends on the success of its energy policy. Securing SLOCs for energy and raw materials supports China's energy policy and is the principal motivation

behind the 'String of Pearls' which relates to China's Grand National strategy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, China has turned its attention and energies to the Indian Ocean region where its interests in energy security and economic development lie. China's vigorous soft-power diplomacy and maritime aims with the backing of material power have yielded a fair measure of success. China is gradually laying the foundations of a strategic maritime infrastructure that would enhance both its economic prospects and its military access to the Indian Ocean region. In general, this refers to bases and seaports scattered along the sea routes linking the Middle East with coastal China, augmented by diplomatic ties with important states in the region.

China's growing strategic interest in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region is firmly rooted in significant expansion of its economy over the last three decades. Most of China's exports as well as its growing imports (energy and mineral resources) are transported through the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean. The energy and resource supplies to China from the Gulf and Africa transit through the narrow choke points in the eastern Indian Ocean and that resource supplies to China could be squeezed by powerful potential adversaries such as the United States. Thus, the energy and resource security considerations have compelled China to pay attention to the protection of its seaborne trade in the Indian Ocean. This in turn has become an important justification for a more modern and powerful navy that would look beyond the traditional security concerns of China.<sup>6</sup> China's new focus on Francophone Western Indian Ocean Island territories had begun to draw widespread attention as it became clear that China will attempt to operate in the Indian Ocean by securing access to bases and facilities in the littoral. Thus, China's new thrust in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region, especially towards Seychelles and Mauritius was though framed within China's broader Africa policy, however there is indeed the centrality of maritime considerations from the Chinese perspective.<sup>7</sup>

1. Energy Security: Dependence on overseas resources and energy supplies, especially oil and natural gas, is playing a role in shaping China's strategy and policy in the region. The paramount concern animating Chinese interests is the energy security. China is the world's number two oil consumer and has accounted for 40 percent of the world's crude oil demand growth since the year 2000. The nation's energy use has more than doubled over the past two decades, exacerbating its dependency on energy imports.<sup>8</sup> The importance of energy to strategically important and growing industries such as agriculture, construction, steel and cement manufacturing, is mounting pressure on China to access energy resources on the world stage.

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The industry's seemingly insatiable appetite for energy resources has brought tremendous domestic political pressure on China to assure an uninterrupted flow of energy. Thus, the energy security has become an area of vital importance to China's stability and security. Secure access to foreign oil resources has become necessary both for continued economic growth and because growth is the cornerstone of China's domestic stability and for the survival of the Chinese Communist regime. China has sought out supplies of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf as well as from Africa. It's also stepping up efforts to secure sea lanes and transport routes that are vital for oil shipments.

2. Securing Sea Lines of Communication: Energy security and resource diplomacy have compelled China to cast anxious eyes on the sea lines of communication. Presently, transport by sea is China's most viable mode of energy supply. Free passage through the waterways stretching from China's coastlines to the Indian Ocean has taken on special policy importance for China. China's energy acquisition efforts have expanded globally throughout the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. Over 70 percent of China's oil imports come from the Middle East and Africa, all of which are transported by sea. Although China seeks to obtain secure supply lines and reduce dependence on a limited number of energy suppliers, sea transport from the Middle East and Africa remains the primary mode of petroleum import. China has demonstrated a long-term commitment to these supply sources as evidenced by relationships with Middle Eastern and African oil exporters. China depends heavily on international sea-lanes, through the Strait of Malacca and other navigational chokepoints, to import oil from the Middle East and Africa. SLOCs connecting China with Africa and the Middle East pass through the Strait of Malacca (a narrow passage jointly administered by Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia). Ninety-five percent of the oil used in China is transported by sea and 80 percent of that is shipped through the Strait of Malacca. Shipping in the Strait is extremely crowded and it is a haven for pirates and terrorists. According to the International Maritime Bureau's annual piracy report, 37 incidents occurred in the Malacca Strait in 2004, many of which involved the crew being kidnapped for ransom or attacked by machine guns and rocket launchers. Malacca Strait is along China's 'seaborne oil lifeline', but beyond the reach of the Chinese Navy. Thus, vulnerability of SLOCs is perceived as a geopolitical risk and China's current means of protecting these sea routes is extremely limited. This is one of the factors for Chinese 'String of Pearls' strategy.<sup>10</sup>

Ninety-five percent of the oil used in China is transported by sea and 80 percent of that is shipped through the Strait of Malacca. Shipping in the Strait is extremely crowded and it is a haven for pirates and terrorists.

3. **Competition for Regional Hegemony:** China has exercised its diplomatic and economic instruments of national power to reduce the regional influence of the United States as well as India. The balance of power throughout the 'String of Pearls' region has shifted and will continue to shift as China grows in strength and stature. However, changes to this balance are primarily economic, diplomatic, and 'soft power' changes. Nations in the region have discovered that they do not have to choose sides in the economic or diplomatic arena. Regional states are not prohibited from maintaining favorable relations with the United States, India and China. Militarily, the entire region is dominated by the United States and will continue to be so dominated for the foreseeable future. As long as China does not pose a military threat and the United States is able to guarantee regional stability, nations are free to accommodate China's economic and diplomatic rise to their benefit.<sup>11</sup> China is now all set to compete with India in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region with its intense high-level political activism and attention in the region.

4. **Trade and Development:** China's diplomatic and economic activity is geared towards securing markets for exports, obtaining raw materials and energy resources and enhancing its international stature. The scale and depth of China's resource diplomacy in Africa is a major concern for India. In fact, India has been chasing China in its quest for equity oil and acquisition of mineral resources all around the world, including Africa.

## Policy and Strategy

Dependence on overseas resources and energy supplies is playing a role in shaping China's strategy and policy in the region. It also factors heavily in China's relations with African countries to pursue long-term supply agreements as well as its relations with countries that sit astride key geostrategic chokepoints, to secure passage. Beijing's belief that it requires such special relationships in order to assure its energy access shapes its defence strategy and force planning which includes increased investment in a blue-water capable fleet and potentially more military presence abroad. Chinese strategy in the Indian Ocean region can be seen as a series of well-coordinated, sequential manoeuvres. Diplomatic work combined with efforts to negotiate forward naval basing rights may lend legitimacy to a more robust Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean basin. China has already embarked on a naval modernization program that will allow the PLA Navy to rival the navies of the major powers. The Chinese strategy in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region has following dimensions:

1. **China's Maritime Strategy:** The 'String of Pearls' concept explain China's pattern of behaviour in the Indian Ocean region. China could leverage its informal strategic alliances with different countries to check India's rise and monitor maritime activities carried on by the maritime competitors. China's growing interests and influence along the 'String of Pearls', primarily driven by

the need to secure energy resources and trade routes, present a complex strategic situation that could impact the future direction of China's relationship with neighbours throughout the region. The 'String of Pearls' presents a complex strategic situation with many facets. The 'pearls' extend from the coast of mainland China through the littorals of the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and on to the littorals of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. China is building strategic relationships and developing a capability to establish a forward presence along the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that connects China to the Middle East. Each 'pearl' in the 'String of Pearls' is a nexus of Chinese geopolitical influence or military presence. Hainan Island, with recently upgraded military facilities, is a 'pearl'. An upgraded airstrip on Woody Island, located in the Paracel archipelago 300 nautical miles east of Vietnam, is another 'pearl'. A container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh, is also a 'pearl'. Construction of a deep water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, is another 'pearl', as is the construction of a navy base in Gwadar, Pakistan. The Gwadar project has enhanced the strategic, diplomatic, and economic ties between Pakistan and China. Port and airfield construction projects, diplomatic ties, and force modernization form the essence of China's 'String of Pearls'. The maritime frontier beyond Taiwan, especially along the 'String of Pearls' is an area where China can make strategic advances to expand power and gain influence. This opportunity, coupled with the motives to secure maritime trade routes and energy supply routes along vital SLOCs, best explains the 'String of Pearls' in its geopolitical context.<sup>12</sup>

It is also quite evident from the recent Chinese initiatives and endeavors in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region that it would like to emulate the Indian Navy's wide-ranging activism in the region.

2. Friendship and Good Neighbourliness: China is aware of the possibility that its growing stature could be construed as a threat to other countries, so a generally benign approach to gain influence is pursued through the use of investments, development packages and diplomatic gestures. As a result, China is viewed more favourably despite the authoritarian nature of its domestic politics. China has given massive aid to Indian Ocean nations, signing friendship pacts, building ports in Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as Sri Lanka, and reportedly setting up a listening post on one of Myanmar's islands near the strategic Strait of Malacca. China's approach to relations with states in the 'String of Pearls' region appears to be value-neutral with regard to ideological or human rights concerns.

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China is focused on achieving practical strategic objectives and maintains favourable relations with even 'rogue states' that have histories and reputations of behaviour objectionable to the world community, weapons proliferators, human rights abusers, aggressive military postures, and supporters of terrorism. China's engagement with rogue states such as Sudan in Africa undermines attempts by the West to isolate or effect change in those regimes.<sup>13</sup>

3. **China's Africa Diplomacy:** China is intensifying its economic and political cooperation with the African countries. China is keen to promote bilateral military and security cooperation with all African states.<sup>14</sup> China is stepping up its contribution to international peacekeeping operations especially in Africa. There have been also reports about China's growing arms transfers to the African states.<sup>15</sup> The cooperation between China and African countries in the Indian Ocean region is now getting more and more visible, particularly after the China-Africa summit in Beijing in November 2006. China is rapidly increasing military and maritime links with Francophone Western Indian Ocean states such as Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the President of the world's largest nation chose to show up, in quick succession, in two of the world's smallest countries, Seychelles and Mauritius, speaks of the strategic significance of the two Island nations. The two recent trips of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Africa in February 2007 and February 2009 ended in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands, former in Seychelles and the latter in Mauritius.

China appears to be determined to step up its relations with Mauritius and Chinese President Hu's visit in February 2009 was an expression of that political will. In the first-ever visit to Mauritius by a Chinese Head of State, President Hu announced a US\$260 million loan for the modernization and expansion of the airport in Port Louis and the speeding up of the completion of the US\$730 million dollar special economic zone.<sup>17</sup> They represent the Chinese interest in picking up a stake in the infrastructure of the island nation and taking full advantage of Mauritius as the gateway to Africa. The massive special economic zone project is expected to become a hub for Chinese commercial activity in Africa.<sup>18</sup> It is also the largest single injection of foreign capital into the island and is expected to generate up to 40,000 jobs and generate exports of up to US\$200 million annually.

Chinese interest in the region is also evident from its focus on cooperation with Seychelles. Seychelles President James Michel was in Beijing in November 2006 to participate in the first China-Africa Summit and barely three months later, President Hu went on a return visit to Seychelles. Though China has few difficulties in rapidly expanding its influence in Seychelles due to the small size of Seychelles economy and the limited nature of its requirements, in a major move China is trying to sell arms and establish listening posts and monitoring stations in the island state. China has also attempt to explore Seychelles



expansive waters for oil and natural gas. Seychelles has an Exclusive Economic Zone of nearly 1.3 million square kilometres.<sup>19</sup>

4. **Soft Power Diplomacy:** The influence of great powers is generally measured in indices of "hard power" such as military capability. In contrast, soft power is the ability to influence other societies through such real but intangible elements as culture. China is essaying a sophisticated, long-term strategy aimed at securing its maritime position in the Indian Ocean region through impressive use of soft power. Chinese effort is to develop soft power through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and economic inducements. China's civilizational appeal is indeed enjoying a renaissance. The ability of Chinese soft power to shape behaviour is due to the popularity of the Chinese language with foreigners and the spread of Chinese educational institutions. China has cultivated close relationships with littoral states that are likely to look favourably or at least refrain from objecting to a Chinese naval presence in their vicinity. China's neighbours have adopted sophisticated diplomatic and military strategies, defying notions of a linear progression toward geopolitical alignment with major players in the region, especially China, India and the United States. Chinese soft-power strategy is working, Beijing is pressing ahead. Securing beachheads in the Indian Ocean basin represents a precursor to a more vigorous future strategy in the region.<sup>20</sup>

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#### Implications for Indian Interests

China's presence in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region represents an enormous political and military challenge to India. China seems to have a higher level of physical presence in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean's various island nations than would be warranted by its present levels of trade and other economic activities. In recent years there has been a big upswing in military exchanges between China and those African nations having coastlines on the Indian Ocean. China has had a long-term geo-strategic action plan and it is slowly building up its military strength and influence. China is interested in having bases around the Indian Ocean littoral to secure energy supplies to feed its growing economy and to contain and encircle India. However, China's expanding interests in the region will encounter India which entertains nautical ambitions of its own and enjoys marked geo-strategic advantages. An expansive Chinese maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean basin backed by hard power, will meet with

countervailing soft and hard power deployed by a resurgent India. At least three determinants stand out among the myriad factors bearing on China's naval ambitions in the region. China's impressive soft-power diplomacy in the region, could find itself rivaled by Indian soft power. India discerns real, compelling interests in the Indian Ocean and enjoys venerable seafaring traditions that offer a major reserve of soft power. China's attempt to amass hard power, embodied in PLA Navy expeditionary forces stationed along the string of pearls, in the Indian Ocean region, will encounter an India accustomed to predominance in its neighbourhood and determined to uphold that predominance against all comers. India is beefing up its military, flush with cash from its expanding economy, with the expansion seemingly aimed at China. India has set up listening stations in Mozambique and Madagascar, in part to monitor Chinese movements. It also has an air base in Kazakhstan and a space monitoring post in Mongolia, both China's neighbours. India has announced plans to have a fleet of aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines at sea in the next decade and recently tested nuclear-capable missiles that put China's major cities well in range. It is also reopening air force bases near the Chinese border.<sup>21</sup>

Indian and Chinese maritime interests are a natural outgrowth of their impressive economic growth and the attendant appetite for energy resources. Both have a vested interest in open and secure sea lanes. As a result, both compete to woo neighbouring nations throughout Africa and Asia. China has sent youth groups to Seychelles to volunteer and engineers to help Pakistan complete a deep sea port at Gwadar for accessing Iranian oil, while India patrols the coast of Mozambique and builds a monitoring station in Madagascar. In the game of 'oceanic chess', India and China are pursuing for military advantage. Nations looking on from the sidelines can't help but wonder whether the mounting competition for strategic partners around the rim of the Indian Ocean, along with expectations that nations choose sides, will disrupt the region or provide lasting security.<sup>22</sup> Given that commercial shipping must traverse the same oceanic routes to reach Indian and Chinese ports, mutual fears persist that the bodies of water stretching from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea could be held hostage in the event of crisis or conflict.

The battle for oil dominance and its control is the factor that is likely to have a long-term impact on the overall security environment in the Indian Ocean region. India's energy needs, which resemble China's, could impel New Delhi into zero-sum competition at sea. From the perspective of international strategy, the Straits of Malacca is without question a crucial sea route. It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on flow of the world's energy and the energy route of China.<sup>23</sup> In fact, India sits astride two 'choke points' for global oil supplies, the Straits of Hormuz to its west, and the Straits of Malacca to its east.

India enjoys strong political and security ties with Francophone Western

Indian Ocean island nations. However, India is anxious about the scale and intensity of the diplomatic and political energies that China seems to be devoting to the two island nations of the region, Seychelles and Mauritius. India's concerns are about China's strategic intentions underlying its high profile outreach to these two island states. The big question for India is whether China is laying the foundation for wresting these two small states out of what has been widely perceived as India's sphere of influence in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. In fact, India, which already has close military and security ties with these island nations, would not want to be outflanked by China in the region.<sup>24</sup>

India's links with Mauritius are deeper and more enduring. Few other countries in the world are as intimately linked to India as Mauritius. Nearly 68 percent of its population is of Indian origin and deeply values the relationship with the mother country. India's profile in every aspect of the life of Mauritius remains significant and high.<sup>25</sup> However, though India's bilateral trade and economic engagement with Mauritius is deeper and larger than that with China, President Hu's visit to Mauritius signalled that this might not remain uncontested. With Chinese rapidly rising profile in Mauritius, India would have every incentive to consolidate, expand and protect its role as the principal security and military partner of Mauritius. India will also closely monitor any attempt by China to explore Seychelles expansive waters for oil and natural gas. Even more important from India's perspective is to prevent a major move by China to sell arms or establish listening posts and monitoring stations on the island state. There have been indications that concerns about Beijing stepping in to supply arms to Seychelles compelled New Delhi to embark on a pre-emptive move in early 2005 when the Indian Naval Chief, Admiral Arun Prakash, gifted the 'INS Tarmugli', a fast attack craft, to the Seychelles Coast Guard. The Indian Naval Headquarters considered the request from Seychelles so urgent that it decided to pull the ship out of its own fleet barely three years after commissioning. India would be extremely reluctant to see an expanded role for the Chinese Navy in the region. India has also followed China in giving a greater coherence to its diplomatic efforts in Africa. Following the first China-Africa summit in Beijing at the end of 2006, India organised a smaller version of its own Africa summit in mid-2008.<sup>26</sup>

### India's Strategic Interests in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region

Indian Ocean is important for India from economic, political, legal and military perspectives. Indian Ocean is India's backyard and it's both natural and desirable for India to function as the leader with the predominant influence in this region, the world's only region and ocean named after a single state. India's Maritime Doctrine is quite explicit on the central status of the Indian Ocean in Indian strategic thought and on India's determination to constitute the most important influence in the region. India's primary maritime interest is to

assure national security. India needs a secure maritime environment to achieve sustained national development. This is not restricted to just guarding the coastline and island territories, but also extends to safeguarding interests in the exclusive economic zone as well as protecting the trade.

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India is a 'continental' power and it occupies a central position in the Indian Ocean region. This is a fact that has profound influence on India's strategic thinking. No industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure is possible for India unless her shores are protected. India is strategically located vis-à-vis both continental Asia as well as the Indian Ocean region. 50 percent of the Indian Ocean basin lies within a 1,000 mile radius of India, a reality that has strategic implications. Under the law of the sea, it has an exclusive economic zone of 772,000 square miles. India's security perimeter, its 'rightful domain' extends from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz and from the coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia. India clearly sees certain diplomatic, economic, and military interests at stake in Indian Ocean waters. In particular, shipments of Middle East oil, natural gas and raw materials are crucial to India's effort to build up economic strength commensurate with its need and geopolitical aspirations.

1. Energy Security: An important strategic interest of India is the Energy Security. India is the fourth-largest economy in the world (in purchasing-power-parity terms) and almost 70 percent dependent on foreign oil (expected to rise to 85 percent by 2020). Indian security analysts foresee energy security as India's primary strategic concern in the next few years. India needs to protect its offshore oil and gas fields, ongoing deep-sea oil drilling projects in its vast exclusive economic zone and an extensive infrastructure of shore and offshore oil and gas wells, pumping stations and telemetry posts, ports and pipeline grids, and refineries. Additionally, Indian public and private-sector oil companies have invested several billion dollars in recent years in oil concessions in foreign countries, many of them in the region. These investments are perceived to need military protection.<sup>27</sup>

2. Securing Sea Lines of Communication: The Indian Ocean is home to many choke points, such as the Straits of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca, Lombok and the Sunda Straits. Any disruption in traffic flow through these points can have

disastrous consequences. The disruption of energy flows in particular is a considerable security concern for littoral states, as a majority of their energy lifelines are sea-based. Since energy is critical in influencing the geo-political strategies of a nation, any turbulence in its supply has serious security consequences. Given the spiralling demand for energy from India, China and Japan, it is inevitable that these countries are sensitive to the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and choke points of the Indian Ocean region. The criticality of the sea-lanes from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca is evident from the fact that of the US\$ 200 billion worth of oil comes out of the Strait of Hormuz annually, US\$ 70 billion passes through the Straits of Malacca, mainly bound for China, Japan and South Korea.<sup>28</sup> The two major powers of the region, China and India, are scrambling for advantage. The Straits of Malacca, the world's second busiest sea lane, assume relevance. US\$ 70 billion worth of oil passes through the straits each year. Almost half the world's containerized traffic passes through this choke point. Most of the ships approach the straits through the 10 degree channel between the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Since trade is the life blood of India, keeping SLOCs (sea lines of communication) open in times of peace, tension or hostilities is a primary national maritime interest. The trade conveyed by the sea-lanes traversing the Indian Ocean ranks first among the 'strategic realities' that the framers of the Indian Maritime Doctrine discern. Roughly forty merchantmen pass through India's 'waters of interest' every day. India's geographic location and conformation rank next in New Delhi's hierarchy of strategic realities.<sup>29</sup>

3. Economic Interests: The foregoing security considerations are the primary ones for India in the region. However, there also are important commercial reasons for New Delhi to pursue a robust Indian Ocean strategy. In the Indian view, "the maritime arc from the Gulf through the Straits of Malacca to the Sea of Japan is the equivalent of the 'New Silk Route' and total trade on this arc is U.S. \$1,800 billion." In addition, large numbers of overseas Indians live in the region, they and their remittances, constitute a factor in Indian security thinking. Thus, India is increasingly attentive to its interests in the region. Protecting its EEZ of over 2.3 million square kilometres, securing energy lifelines, promoting overseas markets and fulfilling international commitments are some of the interests to which India is sensitive. New Delhi's growing ties with Francophone Western Indian Ocean states and its naval, air and nuclear weapons modernization efforts, all are related to these concerns. India is trying to exert a strong hand in this region due to these fundamental national security reasons.<sup>30</sup>

### India's Strategy in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region

In light of its strategic interests, India is pursuing a variety of policies aimed at improving its strategic situation in the region. The 'Indian Maritime Doctrine' describes India's maritime strategy largely as a function of economic development and prosperity. This official document complements a variety of

actions by India that underscore its ambitions and intent in the region. India believes that its security will be best guaranteed by enlarging its security perimeter and specifically achieving a position of influence in the Indian Ocean region. India is forging a web of partnerships with certain littoral states and major external powers to increase its influence in the region certainly to acquire more strategic space and strategic autonomy and to create a safety cushion for itself.

**India's Indian Ocean Policy:**<sup>31</sup> The wave of globalisation in the 1990s compelled India to revise its policy for the Indian Ocean region. India's economic liberalisation and willingness for integration into the global economy created new openings for cooperation in the region. Since the early 1990s, India has demonstrated its keenness to engage the littoral states, regional powers as well as the great powers in its security strategy for the region. The readiness to shed the ambiguities of the non-alignment era and willingness to enter into strategic dialogues with those so interested with India has set the stage for cooperation with France, USA and other powers in the Indian Ocean region. It has helped to remove wide spread doubts and apprehensions about India's political motivations in the region. India discarded its traditional rhetoric and concept of 'Indian Ocean Zone of Peace'. The language and policy of 'nonalignment' and a diplomatic approach marked by moral dimension became history. India moved to a new stress on the argument of power from its past emphasis on the power of the argument. Now engagement is the key word of India's Indian Ocean policy in contrast to the cold war policy of isolation. This engagement has been beneficial in terms of deepening India's economic and security links with the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. Thus, shift in Indian policy has created new openings for cooperation with Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands in the Indian Ocean region.

**India's Francophone Africa Policy:**<sup>32</sup> India's Francophone Africa policy has also undergone significant changes in the post cold war period. There has been a perceptible shift in its approach and attitude towards the problems of the Francophone African countries. The new feature of India's foreign policy is its emphasis on strengthened relations with African states. India has adopted several means of economic interaction with these countries, which include bilateral agreements, granting of credits and loans etc. High-level visits from India, study cum business tours organised by institutions like the ASSOCHAM, CII, FICCI, FIEO etc and government representatives have opened up new vistas of cooperation. India has taken a large number of initiatives by way of visits by senior experts, policy makers and diplomats to some of the important Francophone African countries. Under ITEC and SCAAP, the Indian government has sent technical assistance worth US\$ 2 billion to Africa. The launching of IOR-ARC, India-Africa Interest Group, TEAM-9, Focus Africa etc shows that the Indian foreign policy in context of Africa is on move. India launched an integrated "Focus Africa" programme from the year 2002-2003 to enhance its

trade with the Sub-Saharan African region. The Focus Africa programme focuses on Sub-Saharan African region with added emphasis on seven major trading partners of the region viz. Nigeria, South Africa, Mauritius, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Ghana.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the scope of this programme was further extended with effect from 1 April 2003 to all the other countries of the Sub-Saharan African region, where India has diplomatic missions. Thus, the programme in effect, covers the entire African continent. Under this programme, the Government of India extends assistance to exporters, Export Promotion Councils, etc. to visit these countries, organise trade fairs and invite African trade delegations to visit India. In continuation of its broader Francophone Africa policy, India has also made efforts to strengthen cooperation with the countries of Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. India's deepening security links with several key countries in the region also displays a considerable degree of understanding of its security interests in the region. In this era of globalisation with the advent of a new self-confidence, India has firm focus on the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region especially emphasizing security activism in the region.

**India's Soft Power Diplomacy:** In its international relations, India is now backing its political and economic diplomacy with soft-power diplomacy. Soft power is the ability to influence other societies through such real but intangible elements as culture. India is among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power. The spiritualism of India has attracted people from all over the world, and its Gurus have travelled around the world selling yoga and mysticism. Bollywood has done more for Indian influence abroad than the bureaucratic efforts of the Government. From classical and popular music to its cuisine, from the growing impact of its writers and intellectuals, India now has begun to acquire many levers of soft power. The biggest instrument of Indian soft power is the Indian Diaspora apart from music, films, sports, yoga and ayurveda. People of Indian origin are extremely important sources of support for the Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence and respect they command in the countries in which they live.<sup>34</sup> Indian Diaspora has helped India raise its standing abroad and has spread Indian influence. While India has emphasized its cultural and civilizational links with African countries for decades, its soft power diplomacy has received a boost with the new initiative to rope in its Diaspora in strengthening relations with African countries.

Since early 1990s, there has been a proactive interest of Indian government in the overseas Indians. The Indian policy changed significantly with regard to this segment during 1990s. The submission of the L.M. Singhvi Committee Report on PIOs (People of Indian Origin) and NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) on 8 January 2002 may be looked at as the most important embodiment of this change in outlook and approach. The government has undertaken initiatives like celebration of Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas and the creation of a separate Ministry for Overseas Indians in the light of the recommendations of the L.M.

Singhvi Committee Report. The Indian government now stood for active and overt association of the PIOs for foreign policy objectives of India. India wants to promote its economic interests and it has become paramount in Indian foreign policy. When the liberalization process started in early 1990s, the government of India tried to rope in first the NRIs and then the Indian settlers abroad to attract foreign direct investment. The PIOs are important and relevant overseas segment to be roped in India's new drive for strengthen bilateral relations with Francophone Western Indian Ocean states. They are certainly an important factor in India's relations with Francophone Western Indian Ocean states like Mauritius, Madagascar<sup>35</sup> and Seychelles which have significant population of Indian Diaspora.

**Military Diplomacy:** Supplementing its diplomatic initiatives, India is also shaping its military capability in the region. New Delhi is mainly focused on equipping its navy and air force with nuclear capabilities that could be employed in a contingency. India's intention to add a sea-based leg to its nuclear posture is longstanding and was a prominent feature of the Draft Nuclear Doctrine promulgated by India's National Security Advisory Board in 1999. The Cabinet Committee on Security also implicitly endorsed this goal in its 2003 restatement of many of the Doctrine's key points. The agenda is that Indian forces should be able to keep China's navy out of the Indian Ocean and if needed enter the South China Sea and project military power directly against the Chinese homeland, to project military power elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, at key choke points, on vital islands, around the littoral and along key sea routes in the Indian Ocean region. India is willing to use its navy and air force, through 'military diplomacy', to advance the Indian agenda in the Indian Ocean region. India's new Maritime Doctrine declares, 'Navies are characterized by the degree to which they can exercise presence, and the efficacy of a navy is determined by the ability of the political establishment of the state to harness this naval presence in the pursuit of larger national objectives'. To this end, 'the Indian maritime vision for the first quarter of the 21st century must look at the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest'.

The Indian military diplomacy in the region include a continuing programme of coordinated patrols with Indonesia in the Malacca Strait, naval surveillance of the Mauritius exclusive economic zone since mid-2003, and patrols off the African coast. An Indian Navy spokesman asserted that in these patrols the 'Indian warships were demonstrating the Indian Navy's emergence as a competent, confident, and operationally viable and regionally visible maritime power'. The Indian military has also been very active in pursuing combined exercises with a variety of Indian Ocean partners. These manoeuvres underscore the new flexibility and reach of Indian military forces. The Indian Navy conducted simultaneous combined exercises with Singapore in the South China Sea and with France in the Arabian Sea in late February and early March 2005. All this was followed immediately by a multiservice, combined planning



exercise with the United Kingdom in Hyderabad; a naval exercise with South Africa and a port call by warships in Vietnam in June 2005; and the deployment of a large flotilla to Southeast Asian waters in July 2005. The agenda in the late 2005 included naval manoeuvres with the United States in the Arabian Sea in September, with Russia in the Bay of Bengal in October, and with France in the Gulf of Aden in November. In addition, New Delhi partnered with Russia in a combined air-land exercise near the Pakistan border in October 2005 and with the United States in November in a COPE INDIA air exercise.<sup>36</sup>

Project Seabird: An ambitious Indian move in the military field is Project Seabird. This plan with origins from the mid-1980s is to be assessed in light of two geopolitical triangles juxtaposing on the Indian Ocean's background, U.S.-India-China relations and China-Pakistan-India relations. Project Seabird consists of Karwar naval base, an air force station, a naval armament depot and missile silos. The naval base INS Kadamba in Karwar, Karnataka state will protect the country's Arabian Sea maritime routes. Kadamba will become India's third operational naval base, after Mumbai and Visakhapatnam. The Indian Navy is also establishing a base in the Andaman Islands to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region and patrol its prized sea lanes.<sup>37</sup> The geopolitics of the Arabian Sea and the Western Indian Ocean largely explains India's determination in such an \$8.13 billion enterprise. The China-Pakistan-India triangle is more than ever the Arabian Sea's decisive geostrategic setting. From the perspective of military security, Pakistan provides China an effective counter-balancing partner in front of India's ambitions. The Sino-Pakistani cooperation has further contributed in accelerating India's plans to regain the upper hand in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. This may also spark a naval race in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region if China places its most advanced vessels in Pakistan's Gwadar Port.<sup>38</sup>

### India's Relations with the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands:

India is seeking to increase its profile almost in all direction from its shores to advance its security and economic interests, including the security of the various 'gates' to the Indian Ocean. The effort is to cultivate ties with the nations adjacent to the choke points, the Strait of Hormuz (Iran), the Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti and Eritrea), the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel (South Africa and Mozambique), and the Singapore and Malacca straits (Singapore and Thailand), among others. Indian strategic and diplomatic initiatives are aimed at gaining partners or client states which have once strong ties with India in the past. Indian efforts to advance its cause are also focused on several Indian Ocean African states. Though India's ties with the Indian Ocean states at African coast are limited but are expanding. India's has key connections with some of the states in the Francophone Western Indian region including Mauritius, Madagascar and Seychelles. Indeed, India's cooperation with Francophone Western Indian region states represents part of

an Indian “grand strategy” to control the Indian Ocean region.

Though Francophone Western Indian Ocean island states are different due to French culture but they are also very much tied with the third world developing countries like India and has much in common. There is tremendous opportunity for India to strengthen its relations with these island states. There is also clear signal from Francophone Western Indian Ocean island states to develop stronger ties with India. India and Francophone Western Indian Ocean countries have been adjusting their economic policies and development strategy in the light of changing conditions in the world economy. India after the liberalisation of its economy has made a continuous effort to integrate with the littoral economies through a variety of regional and subregional mechanisms.

Defence and Maritime Cooperation: India has in place formal mechanisms for defence and security cooperation with some of the Francophone Western Indian Ocean island states. Within years of its independence, Mauritius turned to India to secure its vast maritime estate. The Mauritius coast guard was established through Indian assistance, and India has regularly provided ships and helicopters to equip the force and officers to man it. Indian naval ships conduct hydrographic surveys for Mauritius. India has been patrolling the exclusive economic zone of Mauritius since early 2003 and it is negotiating a 'comprehensive economic cooperation and partnership' agreement with this 'gateway to the African continent'. In a state visit to Mauritius in April 2005, the

In a state visit to Mauritius in April 2005, the Indian prime minister also reiterated India's commitment to the defence, security and sovereignty of Mauritius.

Indian prime minister also reiterated India's commitment to the defence, security and sovereignty of Mauritius. Recent reports suggest that Mauritius has offered India a project to lease and develop tourist infrastructure on two of its islands called Agalega. Speculation abounds that this project would allow the Indian Navy to develop an important facility in a critical location in the Indian Ocean.<sup>39</sup>

India's security and economic cooperation with Seychelles is also robust. India has trained large numbers of police and military men from Seychelles. A memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation was signed when then Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat visited Seychelles in 2003. India has also gifted a few helicopters to Seychelles over the years. Indian naval ships routinely visit

Seychelles. India also committed to patrol territorial waters of Seychelles, training of its military personnel, and donation of a patrol vessel to help with coastal defence. High-level visits between India and Seychelles have been frequent and included a visit by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi back in 1981.

India has demonstrated its keenness to engage Francophone Western Indian Ocean island states in its security strategy since 1990s. Recently formulated maritime doctrine of India talks about increasing cooperation with other navy to combat emerging common concerns such as terrorism, transportation of weapons of mass destruction, sea piracy and drug trafficking. India's concerned about the transnationals threat like terrorism, piracy, narco-terrorism, gun-running etc led it to sign MOUs with some states to combat terrorism in the region. India has its own designs in the Indian Ocean region. It has been reaching out to Indian Ocean littorals from Africa through joint naval exercises with some countries and by patrolling sea lanes.

China's strategy of bases and diplomatic ties stretching in Indian Ocean region is a major cause of concern for India. In response to a potential Chinese encirclement, India is strengthening her naval capabilities and trying to improve military and security relationship with Francophone Western Indian Ocean islands. Further potential Chinese presence in the region is likely to accelerate India's maritime cooperation with these states. India's growing security profile in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region includes the construction of a high-tech monitoring station in northern Madagascar to tackle piracy and terrorism, while keeping an eye on the sea lanes as well as China which is critical for its security and economy.<sup>40</sup> India will pay US\$2.5 million to lease the station. It is first such facility India has opened in another country because it apprehends threats to its strategic naval assets and its political, economic and military interests in Africa. The monitoring station will have high-tech digital communication systems. The monitoring station is in tune with Indian maritime doctrine that envisages an ambient forward naval presence from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca.<sup>41</sup> Indian initiatives towards these island states were strengthened in September 2005 by the creation of a new defence ministry office headed by a two star admiral charged with assisting these states. These states are vital to India and also friendly and well disposed but their security remains fragile, and therefore India cannot afford to see any hostile or inimical power threaten them.

**The Indian Diaspora Factor:** The Indian Diaspora is indeed a dominant factor in India's relations with Francophone Western Indian Ocean island states. The presence of strong Indian community in this region provides familial and trading links between India and this region. Religion and cultural ties play a considerable part in the politics of most if not of all these islands. The presence of large number of Indian community in Mauritius (around 68 percent of the total population) contributes significantly to the overall economic relations between India and Mauritius. Mauritius has tended since independence to keep its foreign policy broadly in harmony with India. The change in Indian government Diaspora policy in 1990s that is from "dissociation" in earlier decades to "active association" in present era is expected to further enhance the economic and cultural cooperation between India and these countries as significant population of Indian Diaspora is present in Seychelles (around 6

percent of the local population), Madagascar (around 25,000 persons of Indian origin) and French territory of Reunion (around 220,000 persons of Indian origin which is approximately 30 percent of the island's population).<sup>42</sup> Indian Diaspora in this region, very strong economically with good political influence in some countries, has aspiration to establish links with India. Further, the Indian Diaspora in this region is attempting to rediscover their roots, ancestral traditions and cultural heritage, which their forefathers had brought from India. Thus India can engage its Diaspora in strengthening relations with these countries. The Diaspora can be used as a window to open larger area of cooperation. Francophone Western Indian Ocean Island states also want to use Indian Diaspora for the same purpose.

The French Factor: France is an important factor in India's relations with Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands. At the same time there is also possibility of strategic and economic partnership between India and France in the region and they could become partners for the development of the region. France has shown interested in building a comprehensive political and strategic cooperative relationship with India. India too has imperatives, which impel it to reciprocate the French interest. France is the leader of the Franco-phile world extending from France, across Africa and up to Vietnam. There is convergence of French and Indian strategic perceptions regarding the Indian Ocean. French armament industry, especially aircraft and naval ships is well advanced. Transfer of technologies could be an attractive avenue for India's DRDO. French expertise in nuclear power generation plants particularly in light water reactors is appreciable. French expertise in nuclear deterrence with limited nuclear weapon, nuclear weapons control mechanisms and integrated national security management could be of use to India. Thus, there is tremendous scope for cooperation between India and France in the region.

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Both India and France, through Reunion, are Indian Ocean littoral countries. There is no major clash between India and France in the context of the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands are near to France and also India. Both have strategic and economic relations with them. France has historical and cultural connections with the Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands. It has vital strategic, economic and defence interests in the region. Economically, the Islands states are also dependent on France for economic development and aid. France has succeeded in maintaining a strong presence in the region and it is expected that


it will continue to be one of the dominant powers in the region. On the other hand, India is emerging as a major power that follows its own grand strategy in order to enhance its power and interests. It has also vital stakes in the Indian Ocean. India will try to exert a strong hand in this region for fundamental national security reasons. However, India's strategy is not contradictory to French interests in the region. On the contrary, it is a sophisticated policy whose endeavour is to create the necessary balance of power in its geo-strategic environment in order to concentrate on economic, technological and military matters indispensable to its emergence as a true great power. India and France, both, are important maritime powers in the region and have been encouraging bilateral naval exercises and have initiated several strategic dialogues that cover a wide spectrum of relations. The implication of the above facts is that the two, India and France, share many problems in the solution of which they can cooperate. Moreover they can work together in development cooperation with Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands. In light of regional powers ambition to reshape world order along the guidelines of a balanced multi-polarity, a goal already expressed by France, the prospects for a more cooperative relationship between France and India in the region increases. France also seems eager to help India rise in order to counter China's growing influence in the region. Finally, the stability of this region is very crucial for the big economies as well as these islands and it is also very important militarily. The energy security of the world depends on this region, and also the high volume trade. Thus, India and France can together play vital role in security and development of this region.

Indo-French Naval Cooperation in the Region: Indo – French naval cooperation includes ship visits, passage exercises, international fleet review, joint naval exercise (Varuna Series) and exchanges of naval delegations and trainees in defence institutions. Joint exercises between Navies provided the impetus for the growing Indo-French naval cooperation. The Indian navy has exercised most with the French navy including the La Reunion based ships of the French Indian ocean fleet in the Indian Ocean region. The Indo-French joint naval exercise had begun in 1993. Till 2004 France had already conducted seven joint naval military exercises. Out of these *Varuna* 2004 exercise was the biggest and most unique. *Varuna* exercise was unique by the number of aircraft and vessel involved by both nations. During the exercise an equal number of vessels (six each) participated and placed alternatively under French and Indian command. *Varuna* 2004 covered the entire spectrum of naval exercises like anti-air warfare, anti-submarine warfare and air combat. During the exercise, there was exchange of naval officers from the both side. The exercise brings the two navies in full-fledged display of combat. In the past, the two countries have also held passage exercises. In 2000, a flotilla of six French warships, including aircraft carrier FNS Foch, operated with the Indian Navy of the Goa Coast as part of the passage exercise. The French naval participation during the international fleet review at Mumbai in February 2001 further contributed to the growing naval cooperation between the two countries.<sup>43</sup> In

the post cold war scenario, the growing number of naval exercises is intended to contribute to the stability of the Indian Ocean through more transparency in establishing common procedures to long down identical safety regulations and to ensure proper interoperability for the communication systems. This maritime dimension is part of the Indo-French strategic dialogue in regard to the naval cooperation between India and France in the region.

The USA Factor: India is actively developing its strategic relationship with the US and by doing so has further boosted its role in the region. India is seeing gains from advancing its relationship with the United States. The Indian needs along with concerns over the Indian Ocean's security form the context that led India to sign a 10-year defence agreement with United States on 29 June 2005. U.S. has often touted the “natural alliance” between the two expansive, multi-ethnic democracies, but it is on military issues that India would most like to develop its relationship with the U.S. The sea change in India-United States relations since 9/11 has also made it easier for India to enter into close political and security cooperation with America's friends and allies. The slowly escalating competition between the U.S. and China has helped to create a fertile environment for India's ambition to gain status as a great regional power. The U.S. would like India's navy to serve as a bulwark against China as Beijing becomes more active in the Indian Ocean. Also, there are some areas where the U.S. Navy cannot operate, such as the Malacca Straits, where India's presence might be seen as less threatening than that of the U.S. Encouraging India's role as a counter to China, the U.S. has stepped up exercises with the Indian navy and sold it an American warship for the first time, the 17,000-ton amphibious transport dock USS Trenton. American defense contractors have been offering India's military everything from advanced fighter jets to anti-ship missiles.<sup>44</sup> United States and Japan are encouraging India's role as a counterweight to growing Chinese power. At the last meeting of the Indo-US Defence Joint Working Group held in New Delhi, China's 'growing naval expansion in the Indian Ocean' was noted with concern. The meeting also noted, 'China is rapidly increasing military and maritime links with countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar'.<sup>45</sup> Many Indians, moreover, also recognize that because of Washington's desire to draw closer to India in response to overlapping “China” and “terrorism” concerns, the increased American role in the Indian Ocean region lately has increased India's “strategic space” and political-military relevance. Wariness about China also is a factor in recent Indian efforts to increase Japan's profile in the Indian Ocean region. After more than a year of high-level discussions, India, U.S. and France are finally coming together as a bloc to police the Indian Ocean region. Following joint exercises they have laid the foundation for the special Indian Ocean bloc, which would be responsible for securing the sea lanes of communication, interdicting terrorist and pirate ships, and generally protecting the region, on the premise that future conflicts will arise here.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

China has step up its diplomatic and security activism in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. On the other hand, India is growing naval power among the Indian Ocean littoral countries and over the past few years, has placed itself on a path to achieve the regional influence in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian economy has grown rapidly allowing an increasingly confident Indian government to yoke hard power, measured in ships, aircraft and weapons systems, to a foreign policy aimed at primacy in the Indian Ocean region. India has raised its profile and strengthened its position in a variety of nations on the littoral, including most of the Indian Ocean's small island nations. India's links with the other important actors in the Indian Ocean region, the United States, France, Japan and Israel also have been strengthened. India has vital stakes in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region and it's trying to exert a strong hand in this region. The footprints of China and India, the two rising powers, do overlap in the Francophone Western Indian Ocean region. Their search for political influence and maritime access is bound to increase the tensions between the two Asian giants in the region. Thus, India and China are inching towards competition in the strategically important Francophone Western Indian Ocean region and will remain long-term rivals, vying for the strategic space in the region. However, before this competition becomes antagonistic, China and India must have find ways to understand each other's interests and concerns and embark on maritime confidence-building measures. In fact, India has a strategic partnership with China and the naval units of both countries exercised together for the first time well back in November 2005. The Indian strategy is to create the necessary balance of power in its geo-strategic environment in order to concentrate on economic, technological and military matters indispensable to its emergence as a true great power. 

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