

## DEEPENING THE INDIA-FRANCE MARITIME PARTNERSHIP

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As maritime security acquires greater salience in India's foreign policy, New Delhi is increasingly looking to leverage its strategic partnerships, particularly with Paris. Although India and France have joined forces on a number of issues since 1998, regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has never risen to the top of the agenda. However, this may be about to change. In response to growing geopolitical turbulence and more aggressive maritime maneuvering, both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Emmanuel Macron appear eager to expand their strategic engagement. Since Macron's election in 2017, a series of high-level discussions between New Delhi and Paris have focused on the prospects of a stronger maritime security partnership.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the immediate motivation, the ramifications could be far reaching. Bolstering their alliance is bound to move India away from the legacy of nonalignment and military isolationism, pushing it progressively toward coalition building with other powers.

### THE RIPE POTENTIAL

Central to the recent discussions has been the creation of a framework for strategic coordination in the Indo-Pacific. Historically, India-France engagement has focused on arms supplies and high technology cooperation at the bilateral level and an occasional effort to develop shared approaches to global issues, such as climate change and renewable energy. As they explore their bilateral cooperation on regional security, the Indo-Pacific offers ample potential for such an enterprise.

The high-level dialogue between New Delhi and Paris is currently focused on these principal elements: exchanging more maritime intelligence; establishing agreements to expand their naval reach; sharing military facilities; conducting joint

naval operations; and deepening trilateral and multilateral cooperation with like-minded countries. Of course, these will all require a higher level of mutual political trust and a willingness to shed exclusivist claims for regional primacy.

India's political alienation from the West during the Cold War initially made New Delhi reluctant to cooperate on regional security issues with the United States and West European powers. Since the end of the Cold War, however, India and the United States have begun to tentatively explore areas for regional security cooperation. But progress has been excruciatingly slow. Although Washington has been enthusiastic, New Delhi has shown some political and bureaucratic resistance, albeit with some easing thus far under Modi.

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Collaboration with France is likely to progress more rapidly for several reasons. First, India's institutional hesitations are plausibly less intense in relation to France, a middle power that comes with much less political baggage than the United States. Second, France has already been seeking deeper regional security partnerships with several Asian powers. For example, in early 2018, Macron decided to engage China in dialogue on African security issues. Paris has also begun to step up its security consultations with Tokyo. But most notably, as middle powers face an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment, both India and France are eager to deepen their security partnership and strengthen their positions in the Indian Ocean.

### **A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP**

As India's relations with the West and the Anglo-Saxon powers in particular came under stress during the Cold War, France often seemed an exception. Postcolonial India's emphasis on strategic autonomy seemed to resonate with Gaullist France, which reveled in its independent foreign policy during the Cold War. In the early decades after India's independence, France emerged as an important partner in the high technology domain, making crucial contributions to India's heavy water production and nuclear fast breeder reactor program, as well as its rocket program, especially powerful liquid-fuel engines. France also became a major defense partner in the early 1980s, as India began to diversify the sources of its military hardware and decrease reliance on the Soviet Union. Among other hardware, France has supplied Mirage fighter aircraft, Scorpene submarines, and Rafale fighter jets.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Paris and New Delhi shared concerns about U.S. "hyper power." Although their efforts to promote a multipolar world did not seem to bear immediate fruit, France and India drew steadily closer. France was the first to propose finding a way to reconcile India's nuclear weapons program and the global nonproliferation order. After India's nuclear tests in 1998, France sought to limit India's isolation and later worked with the administration of U.S. president George W. Bush to facilitate New Delhi's reconciliation with the global nuclear order. Today, Paris supports India's bid for permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council. The two nations have

also cooperated on climate change, with India supporting the 2015 Paris accord and strongly expressing its continued commitment to the climate agreement even when the United States backed away in 2017. New Delhi and Paris also jointly launched the International Solar Alliance in 2015.

This deepening strategic partnership, however, has lacked a regional dimension. Securing cooperation in the Western Indian Ocean now promises to fill that gap. It also lends an important depth to India's strategy in the Indian Ocean. Since the end of the Cold War, India has sought to develop multiple maritime security partnerships in the east with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, Japan, and the United States. With its long-standing presence in the Western Indian Ocean, France could become a critical partner for India in securing its western maritime flank. Once their partnership is consolidated in the Western Indian Ocean, it could, over time, be extended to the Eastern Indian Ocean and the Pacific.

### **CONVERGING MARITIME INTERESTS**

As the Indo-Pacific becomes a geopolitically contested zone, New Delhi and Paris are recognizing that the uncertain strategic environment in the region, marked by a power shift among the world's leaders, demands greater bilateral cooperation to secure their long-standing interests in the littoral.

Although India's public discourse on the Indian Ocean tends to neglect the importance of France as a regional maritime power, the security establishment is waking up to the benefits of collaboration with France in the Indian Ocean. France, which sees itself as an Indo-Pacific power, retains the islands of Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean and New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the South Pacific. These overseas territories and other scattered islands in the region have given France the largest exclusive economic zone in the world (11 million square kilometers)—62 percent of which is in the Pacific and 24 percent in the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> The Indo-Pacific is home to nearly 1.6 million French citizens and approximately 7,000 permanent French military personnel.<sup>3</sup> France has long maintained a military base in Djibouti and substantive political and economic ties with the island states of the Western Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

When India reoriented its foreign policy in the early 1990s, it slowly began to turn away from the military isolationism integral to its nonaligned worldview. After decades of shunning military engagement with major powers, India gingerly stepped forward to renew civilian defense and military exchanges.<sup>4</sup> Starting with the United States, India's military diplomacy, largely in the naval domain, soon extended to all major powers. India also stepped up its military engagement with many neighbors in the Indian Ocean littoral, starting with the southeast Asian nations.

As India opened its economy to the world, former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee began to argue that India's security interests were not limited to the land frontiers but covered the vast littoral from the Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca. Meanwhile, France seemed preoccupied with European integration and its traditional commitments in the Middle East and Africa. Like in the United States, France was focused on small wars in the post–Cold War era. However, this changed with the rise of China and India and the ensuing geopolitical transformation in the Indo-Pacific.

The 2008 French white paper on defense and national security argued that France must move away from its traditional preoccupation with West Africa toward the Middle East and the Indian Ocean—and from there to East Asia.<sup>5</sup> As the maritime spaces drew greater attention, then prime minister François Fillon announced France's new interest in the oceans. In the foreword of a 2009 strategy document, he declared that France “has a presence in every ocean and every latitude and is responsible for extensive marine areas under its jurisdiction. France has decided to return to its historic maritime role.”<sup>6</sup> One visible demonstration came in the establishment of a new military base in Abu Dhabi in 2009.

In its 2013 white paper, France identified the rise of China as affecting the established “equilibrium of East Asia.”<sup>7</sup> The paper also underlined the growing importance of securing the Indian Ocean as a European access point to Asia. With China's neighbors seeking to safeguard themselves against Beijing's new assertiveness, France saw a significant opportunity to expand its naval arms sales to the region. In 2016, Paris won a major Australian contract for the construction of twelve submarines.<sup>8</sup> And it is now a leading contender to

build six new generation diesel-electric submarines for India, adding to the six Scorpene submarines already in production. There is also speculation that France desires to participate in India's ambitious plan to build six nuclear attack submarines.<sup>9</sup>

The 2013 white paper noted that “France plays a particular role [in the Indian Ocean] reinforced by the development of privileged relations with India.”<sup>10</sup> But Paris found dealing with India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government difficult. After some initial enthusiasm for military and naval diplomacy, the UPA backed away from active maritime collaboration with the United States and other Western powers. Various factors dampened the prospect for active Indian security cooperation with the United States. The left parties of the UPA coalition were strongly opposed to any military engagement with the United States and accused former prime minister Manmohan Singh of abandoning the principles of nonalignment. Many in the ruling Congress party either agreed with this argument or considered it prudent not to alienate the left. Conservatives in the strategic community were also uncomfortable with the new Indian dalliance with the United States. The civilian bureaucracy in the Ministry of Defense was quite suspicious of the emerging security partnership with the United States and the West and was thus reluctant to entertain new ideas.

The depth and breadth of government resistance was reflected in the intensity of opposition to the civil nuclear initiative and a ten-year framework for defense cooperation unveiled by Singh and Bush in 2005. Although Singh eventually managed to push through the civil nuclear initiative and formed a government again in 2009—this time without the support of the left parties—the hesitation on security cooperation with the West, particularly the United States, persisted during the second term of the UPA government (2009–2014). The decade-long UPA rule revealed that while new possibilities for a security partnership with the West existed, there were also deep structural problems preventing their realization. Unsurprisingly, during this period, French attempts to draw India into taking a collaborative approach in the Indian Ocean did not succeed.<sup>11</sup>

However, the change of government in 2014 improved the prospects for India's security partnership with the West. Two factors appeared to change the dynamic. The first was Modi's bolder approach to foreign policy. Unlike leaders of the Congress and some members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Modi's persona has not been burdened by the ideological shibboleths from the past; he has brought a refreshing pragmatism to India's foreign policy. Speaking to the U.S. Congress in 2016, Modi declared that "India has overcome the hesitations of history."<sup>12</sup> He addressed the residual issues in the civil nuclear initiative, renewed the defense cooperation agreement with the United States for another decade, and expanded the scope of political and security consultations with the United States.

The second factor was China's increasingly powerful presence in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean, which has been long viewed by New Delhi as India's backyard. Although Chinese strategic advances in the region had been ongoing for more than a decade, they acquired a new edge after a Chinese submarine docked in the Colombo port in 2014.<sup>13</sup> Several other developments also shook India's complacent attitude: China's sale of submarines to Bangladesh and Thailand, the growing interoperability between the Chinese and Pakistani navies, the prospect of a Chinese naval base in Gwadar, and the establishment of the first foreign military base in Djibouti.

Beijing was not only flying its military flag in the Indian Ocean but also engaging with Indian Ocean littoral states through connectivity and infrastructure projects under its Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). While many of these projects were largely civilian in nature, their strategic importance was not lost on New Delhi. While the UPA government seemed to signal that it would not challenge the MSRI, the Modi administration made no secret of its reservations. The new intensity of India's concerns was evident in New Delhi's refusal to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative conference held in Beijing in May 2017.<sup>14</sup>

In early 2015, Modi traveled to three Indian Ocean island states (Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka) and announced an Indian Ocean policy called Security and Growth for All in the Region. While claiming major responsibility for the

security of the Indian Ocean, Modi signaled that New Delhi was now open to working with other partners and strengthening maritime multilateralism. Modi also signaled India's commitment to taking unilateral steps to strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean. While many of India's maritime initiatives began under the UPA government, Modi injected renewed energy into them.<sup>15</sup>

France was also concerned about the long-term consequences of China's growing power and was determined to raise its own naval profile and that of its European partners in the Indo-Pacific. In its 2015 National Strategy for the Security of Maritime Areas, Paris pointed to the "growing and permanent presence of naval forces in the Indian Ocean . . . increasingly from East Asia and the Middle East . . . [that could] counter [France's] freedom of action at sea, pursue territorial ambitions in disputed maritime areas and thus threaten freedom of navigation in international waters."<sup>16</sup> The 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review was more explicit about the growing challenge posed by Beijing:

Chinese presence in the region, which started in 2008, is now permanent, and relies both on an operational base in Djibouti and a support facility in Gwadar (Pakistan). This trend reflects China's strategic ambition to develop a long-term naval influence in a maritime area extending from the South China Sea to the whole Indian Ocean. China's activities have been widely seen as the most important element in reshaping the entire region's security dynamic. Littoral states worry about the increase in China's activities: this is true of India (historical stakeholder) as well as of Australia which, like France and the United States, has to cope with security issues both in the Pacific and Indian Ocean.<sup>17</sup>

Addressing the 2017 annual defense summit, known as the Shangri-La Dialogue, then French defense minister Sylvie Goulard declared that France is determined to "exercise its responsibility" by contributing to the evolution of the regional security architecture. She also underlined the French commitment to working with other European powers in promoting regional security in the Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

France's and India's interest in securing the Indo-Pacific finds the sharpest expression in the Western Indian Ocean. France's military presence in Abu Dhabi and Djibouti gives it critical access to two major chokepoints, the Strait of

Hormuz (connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea) and Bab-el-Mandeb (connecting the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea and the Suez Canal).<sup>19</sup> France also has an extensive exclusive economic zone in the Mozambique Channel (generated by its scattered islands), expanding its reach and access to the eastern coast of Africa.<sup>20</sup> The French Navy regularly engages the Mozambican Navy in training and assists in surveillance patrols in the channel. French military personnel stationed in Réunion Island contribute to training, capacity building, and surveillance patrols in the Southwest Indian Ocean.

India has had long-standing ethnic, political, and security links to the Western Indian Ocean island states and the eastern coast of Africa. And since the Cold War, security cooperation has attained a more prominent place on India's regional agenda. Former Chinese president Hu Jintao's visits to Seychelles and Mauritius during 2007 and 2009, respectively, compelled India to take a fresh look at Beijing's rising profile in the Western Indian Ocean and to begin strengthening its own position in the littoral.<sup>21</sup> Since Modi's 2015 Indian Ocean tour, New Delhi has been enhancing its naval engagement with Western Indian Ocean island states, especially Mauritius and Seychelles. The new agenda in the littoral includes the development of strategic air and sea facilities in the Agaléga (Mauritius) and Assumption (Seychelles) islands.<sup>22</sup>

## TOWARD STRATEGIC COORDINATION

The election of Macron brought fresh energy to the maritime engagement between the two countries. Modi's visit to Paris to meet Macron in the summer of 2017 was followed by an intensive phase of high-level engagement. This comprised the visits of Indian air and naval chiefs to Paris and the visits of the French defense minister, national security adviser, and foreign minister to New Delhi in the second half of 2017. Maritime security is front and center in this high-level dialogue, which is to be capped by Macron's visit to India in March 2018. As a result, maritime cooperation between India and France is likely to advance along multiple axes. Some of the following ideas are already being considered and others could be taken up in the future.

**Strengthening maritime domain awareness:** In January 2017, New Delhi and Paris signed a White Shipping Agreement during the second round of their maritime security dialogue in New Delhi.<sup>23</sup> Such agreements allow nations to exchange information on commercial shipping and create a shared picture of movements at sea. The two nations could build on this agreement by exchanging information on the movement of military vessels in the Indian Ocean region to increase awareness and strengthen maritime domain awareness capabilities. With their respective strengths in the Eastern and Western Indian Oceans, New Delhi and Paris can benefit from more intensive exchanges of naval intelligence. Some discussion on this is already taking place; after the countries' two defense ministers met in New Delhi in October 2017, the two sides agreed on "the need for greater maritime domain awareness" and decided to "further expand information sharing arrangements."<sup>24</sup>

**Extending mutual logistical support:** Beyond information and intelligence sharing, India and France could explore the prospects for facilitating each other's naval operations in the Indian Ocean. Agreements that enable access to each other's military facilities would allow both navies to extend their reach and improve the efficiency of their operations. Under such agreements, navies can secure fuel and other replenishments, as well as gain access to repair facilities, in the territory of the partner nation. India and the United States began discussing such a logistics support agreement in 2005. But political and bureaucratic resistance—driven by the residual legacy of nonalignment and isolationism—prevented finalization of the agreement until Modi took a fresh look at security cooperation with the United States. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was finally signed in 2016 and operationalized in 2017.<sup>25</sup> France and India could sign a similar, or perhaps even more robust, agreement.<sup>26</sup>

**Embarking on joint military activity:** As they strengthen their respective naval positions in the Western Indian Ocean, it makes sense for India and France to pool their resources and develop coordinated policies for stronger impact. The common Franco-Indian effort could cover training, regional capacity building, and the conduct of joint military operations for humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and search and rescue. The bilateral defense talks in October 2017

hinted at such a possibility when it was stated that the two sides agreed to “actively explore additional measures to facilitate operational level interactions between their respective armed forces.”<sup>27</sup>

**Developing the Andaman and Nicobar islands:** As India works to develop infrastructure in the critically located Andaman and Nicobar island chain in the Bay of Bengal, France can contribute by sharing its experience and expertise in the sustainable development of island territories.<sup>28</sup>

**Launching trilateral cooperation:** India and France have an opportunity to extend their partnership to other countries working toward similar goals. Potential partners for such trilateral cooperation include Australia, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. France already has such mechanisms for regional maritime cooperation in the Pacific with Australia, Japan, and New Zealand.<sup>29</sup> And India is slowly beginning to overcome its past political reservations on plurilateral cooperation with Western countries and their regional allies.

**Deepening multilateral cooperation:** India can support France’s full membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (Paris is currently a dialogue partner). France is already a member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Paris, in turn, could help strengthen New Delhi’s engagement with the Indian Ocean Commission, as well as its maritime cooperation with the European Union.

The range of potential agreements between India and France in the Indian Ocean is vast, and negotiating and implementing them will not be easy. Although the political leadership at the highest levels appears eager to develop an ambitious agenda, they face multiple obstacles.

## OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

India’s defense diplomacy after the Cold War is a testimony to the new possibilities for New Delhi’s role as a “net security provider” in the Indo-Pacific and the difficulties of realizing them.<sup>30</sup> One factor is the residual legacy of nonalignment and military isolationism that has a grip on India’s security establishment, especially the Ministry of Defense. Consider, for example, the huge difficulties the United States has had in

finalizing the LEMOA with India, which took nearly twelve years to negotiate and implement. When India first signed the framework agreement for defense cooperation with the United States in 2005, it faced considerable criticism from the left parties and conservative sections of the security establishment. At the heart of the criticism were the propositions that India might become a “junior partner” to the United States and would lose “strategic autonomy” in the conduct of its external relations. These persistent domestic concerns have limited India’s engagement with the United States and other powers.

The Indian bureaucracy is more comfortable with Paris than Washington, but that does not automatically make it any easier for India to work with France. India’s concerns with the United States are rooted in the legacy of anticolonialism, and thus, they also apply to France and the United Kingdom. Even if many in New Delhi see the value of working with European middle powers, some worry about the political costs among the littoral countries of turning to the West, especially the former colonial powers, for regional security. As part of its anti-imperial and anticolonial tradition, India has historically opposed the presence of “extraregional powers” in the Indian Ocean, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States (during the Cold War). But as China has begun to contest India’s position in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi has become more open to working with Western powers in the maritime domain.

Nonetheless, India has not found it easy to balance its newfound interest in working with Western powers and the traditional imperative of maintaining its anticolonial solidarity with the island states. This tension is most clearly reflected in Mauritius’s claims of sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago and the legitimacy of British control over Diego Garcia, where the United States has a major military base.<sup>31</sup> Many Western Indian Ocean island states barely conceal their continued resentment, with some strongly opposed to France being a full member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.<sup>32</sup> Although France is a resident power of the Indian Ocean, zealously guarding its island territories and inherited influence, its other considerable interests are not all compatible with those of India. The two faces of France as a resident and external (former colonial) power creates a

political dynamic that is not always comforting to India.<sup>33</sup> India's defense establishment has also long viewed France solely as a weapons vendor, not a strategic actor in the Indian Ocean. Although the foreign office in New Delhi and the political leadership see potential in the strategic partnership with Paris, translating that potential into definitive action by the defense establishment remains a challenge.

For France, the concern is not only about New Delhi's foreign policy and partnership with Western powers and its grand strategy and ideology, but also the nature of daily decision making in New Delhi, which France, like so many of India's interlocutors on defense policy, finds so frustrating. The well-known complexity of civil-military relations in India, where the dominance of the civilian bureaucracy is total, has been a major obstacle to the reform and rejuvenation of India's defense engagement. This has been visible in India's inconsistent approach to defense and security cooperation generally and with Western powers in particular. As noted by the French strategic analyst Lee Corder, the "lack of engagement and alignment between India's defence civil bureaucracy and senior military leadership casts serious doubts upon the coherency of India's military and national security establishment and the quality of advice provided to India's political leadership."<sup>34</sup> There is also the tussle between the Indian Ministry of External Affairs that now sees the value of defense diplomacy and the civilian leadership of the Ministry of Defense that remains ambivalent. These internal tensions have led to a situation where India's international partners "remain uncertain about the veracity, integrity, and consistency of Indian policy" on defense cooperation.<sup>35</sup>

There is also a potential conflict of interest. Some in France see India's activism in the Western Indian Ocean as encroaching on its traditional sphere of influence. As the University of Paris's Isabelle Saint-Mézard notes, "India's activism is a signal that it is losing its special relations with these island-states. Nevertheless, despite its overstretched capabilities, Paris is anxious to maintain its influence over the sub region and remains very active in the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), a regional organization that includes the Seychelles, Mauritius, the Comoros and Madagascar."<sup>36</sup>

Yet the larger political turbulence generated by the rise of China, its power projection into the Indian Ocean, and the uncertainty about U.S. policies are nudging India and France toward each other. Paris recognizes that China poses a much larger threat to its interests in the Indian Ocean and that a strategic maritime partnership with India could ameliorate that problem.

Incremental, yet sustained, expansion of maritime cooperation could help both sides overcome their traditional inhibitions. The Indo-Pacific offers the long-missing regional anchor to the strategic partnership between India and France. A more intensive maritime relationship could help both countries and the region become less vulnerable to big changes in U.S.-China relations. More importantly, it would blow fresh wind in the sails of India's engagement with Western maritime democracies. It would help India overcome the legacy of military isolationism and lend credibility to its claims as a "net security provider" in the Indo-Pacific and to its aspiration of being a "leading power." For France, India lends extraordinary political and strategic depth to the French position in the Indo-Pacific and helps sustain its role as a great maritime power in the East.

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