



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE INDO-FRENCH RELATIONS: LOOKING TOWARDS INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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ABSTRACT

The recent trend in Indian foreign policy focuses primarily on the diplomatic engagement with great powers. So far, Indo-French relations are concerned, it was even cordiale during the Cold War period. It improved much more after 1965 and 1971 wars. The golden period was the year 1998 with India's nuclear explosion. France, then, was the only country that did not imposed any sanction and more important it signed strategic partnership with India. From hence onwards, Indo-French objective in the Indian Ocean region was to work for peace and stability. France not only supported bilateral relations but also believed in multilateral approach to solve the problem. The author discuss various ways and means adopted by India and France to bring stability in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

Since last year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made major changes in the conduct of India's foreign policy. Inevitably, the recently trends focus primarily on the Modi administration's diplomatic engagement with great powers, such as the United States, European Union and emerging China. In contrast, when one discusses India's relations with European nations it is almost based on economic and trade-related issues. There is, however, another aspect of security, i.e., India's security ties with certain industrialized middle powers in Europe. They often overlook the strategic dimension of these relationships. But so far France is concerned India shares a unique position. This has always been regarded as a brighter side of Franco-Indian relationship. During the Cold War era, when India's did not share good relations with NATO relations between Paris and New Delhi remained relatively cordiale. Although French security policy was not in tune with India's foreign policy because of India's closeness with the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Their own concept of strategic autonomy gave them a degree of empathy for India's quest for maneuverability within a polarized international system.

In spite of this, France was one of the first Western countries to lift the arms embargo after the 1965 conflict. It immensely benefitted India. Similarly, during the 1971 war, France was one of the only Western countries to comment on the refugee problem in its border regions with Bangladesh. Perhaps most importantly, France supported to sermonize India after the 1998 nuclear tests, and publicly opposed U.S. sanctions.

Geo-Politics of the Indian Ocean

The complex geopolitics of the Indian Ocean has attracted much attention among major powers. Indeed, the sea-lanes of communication (SLOCs) crossing the Indian Ocean and then linking Asia to the Persian Gulf and Europe have become major source of world trade. It also affected the energy security of several countries in Europe and Asia. However, these shipping lanes have become victim of various transnational threats ranging from terrorism to piracy. Hence their security has become a matter of grave concern to the world. As a result a number of European and Asian states have stationed their navies in the Northwest Indian Ocean to conduct anti-piracy operations. India, on the other hand, desire to play a major role in the Indian Ocean and has been engaged in close naval cooperation with the U.S., and other dominant powers in the region. China has too made its presence in the Indian

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Ocean. It has developed extensive relations with many countries in the region and deployed its vessels in Somalia for anti-piracy operations. So far Europe is concerned France has a fairly unique position in Indian Ocean. Indeed, France claims to be a nation of the Indian Ocean, i.e. a legitimate regional actor of the Indian Ocean Rim. This is primarily due to the presence of the French overseas territories of La Reunion and Mayotte in the Southwest Indian Ocean. Moreover, France had deployed a substantial military power in the Northwest Indian Ocean. There are two inter-services bases respectively located in Djibouti and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In many ways, this demonstrates French ambitious design to be a middle power with global outreach.

Though Paris is situated 5,000 km away from the western shores of the Indian Ocean, it is ready to work for the security and stability of the region. Its commitment are to respect of international law and the freedom of navigation, protect the SLOCs as well as combat terrorism and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. France has good relations with several countries of the Indian Ocean littoral. For instance, France has economic and defence relations with the Gulf countries (especially the UAE and Qatar) as well as some of the Southeast Asian states such as Singapore. The country has also developed strategic partnership with India since 1998. The Indo-French strategic partnership is importance as seen by the nature of its four pillars of cooperation - civilian nuclear technology, space, counterterrorism and defence. Moreover, in developing its strategic partnership with India, France is well aware of India's growing naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean. This paper tries to examine the importance of Indo-French partnership on the one hand, and the French strategy in the Indian Ocean on the other. In analyzing the pertinent issues both the countries have so far not only had converging interests in the region, but it also focusses the latent divergences. It should be noted that traditionally France has focused on the Western side of the Indian Ocean but now has shown its interest in entire Indian Ocean region. It has recently paid more attention to the Eastern side of this Ocean, as part of a larger opening into Asia. India is probably the country with which France has developed one of its most ambitious strategic partnerships outside Europe and NATO. But it has not shown sufficient positive development as it was much expected from French presence in the region. This makes Indo-French cooperation in the Indian Ocean more demanding, i.e., both should make positive contribution in the region.

The Indo-French strategic partnership

The strategic partnership with India became operative in 1998 under the presidency of Jacques Chirac. Both the countries from thence onward have maintained regular exchanges at the highest level and have developed a solid relationship. In a symbolic gesture, President Hollande visited India in July 2013, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the strategic partnership. The Indo-French partnership is based on the common values of democracy, the rule of law and individual freedom and strategic autonomy. Broadly speaking, this refers to France and India's to work and cooperate closely toward their respective foreign policies either as a close partner or

being part of a security alliance. The Indo-French partnership is also based on converging interests. From an Indian perspective, France is ready to assist and provide high-technology, especially in dual-use technologies. This is also a useful alternative to other Western partners such as the U.S. and the U.K. From French perspective, India as an emerging market it is difficult to boycott Indian industries. Since early days France has always been a partner reliable that can held a stabilizing influence in Asia and as such protecting her congruent with regional interests. In other words, the nation of privileged partner in the region will be more appropriate and France has decided to contribute more. In a significant statement made in 2013, French Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian declared that, "apart from our allies and European partners, there are few countries across the world with which we are prepared to go as far as we do with India". (Jean-Yves Le Drian, 2013). Indeed, the main pillars of the partnership encompass areas of cooperation in the field of civilian nuclear technology. Along with USA, France has actively worked in the international community to allow civilian nuclear energy cooperation with India. After the waiver, France was one of the very first countries to sign a USD 9.3 billion framework agreement for the development of two reactors in Jaitapur, Maharashtra. Intelligence and counter-terrorism are also important issues, especially after terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008. Spatial cooperation had been on the agenda since 1960s and was also successful, as could be well judged by the launching of the Indo-French satellite SARAL in February 2013. Incidentally, the aim of SARAL satellite was to measure the rise in the sea levels, a threat could be a major concern for many Indian Ocean Rim countries. Finally, defence and military cooperation, is the fourth pillar of the partnership, under this, it includes central area of cooperation, politico-military dialogues, armament transfers and joint exercises.

Moreover arms sales have been a major factor for France to engage India. French arms sales to India, actually began in 1950s, and reached its peak in 2005 when both signed a USD 3 billion-deal to transfer six Scorpene-class submarines to the Indian Navy (IN). France hopes to give final shape to a short-range surface-to-air missile project, and, more importantly, to put a stamp of a deal to transfer 126 Rafale combat aircrafts to the Indian Air Force as soon as possible. France and India have conducted regular joint manoeuvres between their Navies (Varuna), Air forces (Garuda) and Land forces (Shakti). The Varuna exercises, which were started in 1998, is now in an advanced stage and have built confidence and trust between the two navies. At a deeper level, this reflects a convergence of interest in the Indian Ocean, based on a common will to enforce the freedom of the seas and to protect the security of the SLOCs.

The limitations of the Indo-French Partnership in the IOR:

Examining the strategic partnership in the context of the Indian Ocean, the French objectives have not been fully met. This has been seen by the two following observations: While the French Navy is adamant to work with Indian navy, it had sometimes found that India a difficult partner. For instance, the convening of the 2013 and 2014 sessions of the Varuna exercises proved to be a protracted process because the Indian side rescheduled

the event many times. This has upset of the French decision markets. The French side has so far failed to bring the Indian navy into multilateral operations, particularly the EU-led Atalanta operation. Nevertheless, the French Navy still believes that it will succeed in convincing the Indian navy to conduct joint operations to secure the Indian Ocean. France also desires that India accepts French status as an Indian Ocean Rim country as well as its special interests in the Southwest Indian Ocean. This has been achieved to some extent. It has been reflected by the fact that the Indian navy invited the French Navy to be a founding member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium initiative (IONS). It was a forum launched in 2008 to develop cooperation on regional maritime security. At the same time, the Indian navy plays an important role in the region and extends its reach towards the small island-states of the Southwest Indian Ocean. In other words, India is increasingly active in an area that used to be “a French ‘private preserve’”, (Bouchard and Crumplin, 2011).

France has shown great interest in developing cooperation with Mauritius and the Seychelles in the field of hydrography, maritime security and counter-piracy, providing both island states with coastal surveillance radar system, fast patrol vessels and other surveillance equipment (Yogesh et al., 2012). For France India’s activism is a signal that it is losing its special relations with these island-states. Nevertheless, despite its overstretched capabilities, France maintains its influence over the sub-region and remains very active in the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). IOC is a regional organization that includes the Seychelles, Mauritius, the Comoros and Madagascar. However, if France and India could cooperate and coordinate with each other in the Southwest Indian Ocean, they will give a new meaning to geopolitical content of their partnership, and thereby contributing more to the security and development of the sub-region.

Indo-French Partnership for the Security of the Indian Ocean

As reflected by the publication of a Blue Book in 2009, the French policy community has become aware of the strategic importance of the seas and oceans (French Government et al., 2009). The so-called “maritimization of the world” has been increasingly discussed by the policy makers. The Indian Ocean has been given due attention in this context: the release of the Southern Indian Ocean Blue Book in 2011 emphasized the need to promote the “blue economy” of the overseas territories of La Reunion and Mayotte, while the 2008 and 2013 White Papers on Defence and Security pointed to the growing geopolitical centrality of the IOR in world affairs (French Government, 2012). However, these maritime policy description have not resulted in developing a clear strategy in the Indian Ocean region. Today, France has variety of strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, but this has not led to a holistic, well-coordinated strategy. One can say that France’s role in this part of the world has been overlooked by external powers. France should be more assertive in pronouncing its policy and objectives so as to project itself as an Indian Ocean power. By doing so it will enhance the visibility of its commitments and interests in this vast region. For instance, the French Navy could enhance its participation in the IONS. France should also

show more interest in the evolution of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), especially in the wake of a dialogue partner of this organisation. France’s interest would no doubt come as a welcomed development at a time when India and Australia seeks to revitalise the IORA and to strengthen links with its dialogue partners. Of the six priority areas promoted by the IORA, France could probably push for greater interactions in the fields of maritime safety and security, fisheries management and disaster risk management (Basrur et al., 2014). In particular, France should be more active on Search and Rescue (SAR) issues. The tragic disappearance of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 in March 2014 has indeed revealed serious lapses in regional SAR arrangements. The 14th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the IORA, which took place in Perth in October 2014, highlighted “the pressing need for greater coordination and cooperation among national search and rescue services in the Indian Ocean region”.⁷ Here one can say that France can play a legitimate role. La Reunion and Mayotte have each one Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre. It covers a substantial SAR area in the Southern Indian Ocean. Moreover, France’s sophisticated satellite technology can prove to be useful of help in SAR operations in the larger region.

The Indo-French bilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean

More importantly, French’s interest lies in making India more aware of its interests. It is important to note that India is more aware of the role and influence of the U.S. and China, and hence pay not so much attention to France or the EU role. To minimise this perception gap, the following initiatives are important both the countries should have a regular dialogue on the Indian Ocean. They should frame a shared strategic vision of the maritime challenges in the region and the policy responses to envisage accordingly. Incidentally, this would serve the French interest to engage India with new sophisticated weapons. India will be immensely benefitted when it will properly understanding not only the French maritime interest but also of the EU maritime Security strategy. There could be further improvement in further naval cooperation between the countries on the basis of its strategic interests in the Western Indian Ocean. For instance, both could have joint manoeuvres in the Mozambique Channel. This is important because the Mozambique Channel is a major shipping route between the Middle East and the Atlantic Ocean and second, India is eager to project its presence in this area, with the Indian navy regularly passing through Mozambique as part of India’s maritime security cooperation with this country. Indeed, a more challenge for France has been to increase the socio-economic development of its overseas territories and focuss more on better integration of the region. Moreover, some recent steps had been taken with La Reunion Chamber of Commerce and Industry to open a representative desk in Chennai in 2013 and Paris grants a short term visa waiver for Indian tourists visiting the island from 2014 onwards.

Open up bilateral cooperation to broader multilateral frameworks

The need of the hour is that both France and India should explore areas of cooperation with other small island-states in

the Indian Ocean with them. India assistance to Mauritius and Seychelles should also be seen in this sense that it develops coastal surveillance and beef up their anti-piracy capabilities. France also taken similar measures on the same issue, either bilaterally or as part of the IOC or EU's antipiracy efforts. Regarding overlapping initiatives, both the countries should apprise each other of their respective initiatives, and work for further as and when required to coordinate. It would be in the interest of India and France to jointly promote capacity building programmes for the island-states (Mauritius, Seychelles, the Maldives and Madagascar) as well as the rim states (Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania) of the Western Indian Ocean. Indeed, many of these states lack maritime surveillance and enforcement capacities and hence cannot monitor their maritime territories. Under the banner of the EU (and with its funding), France has been involved in various programmes to build regional maritime capacities in the region. In this respect, two programmes deserve special mention: EUCAP Nestor launched in July 2012 under the Common Security and Defence policy of the EU, this project, which is headed by French Admiral Etienne de Poncins, aims at reinforcing the maritime capabilities of the states in the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean (Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen, Kenya, the Seychelles, Tanzania) (http://eeas.europa.eu/csdp/missions-and-operations/eucap-nestor/index_en.htm).

The Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean Project with an initial focus on Tanzania, Yemen, Kenya, India, Singapore and South Africa, is to improve maritime security in the West Indian Ocean through Information Sharing, Capacity Building and Operational Policies and Governance. It also plans to establish new Fusion Information Centres in the region.⁹ It is quite clear from the recent development France and the EU should try to work closely with India. This would enhance not only the Indo-French partnership, but also the EU-India partnership. Finally, France should also persuade India to join occasional multilateral operations and to develop interoperability with the navies of its closest partners. Today current maritime threats call for more multi-national operations. In this respect, the Varuna bilateral exercises between the Indian and French navies should be more open up to other European nations. Here, the U.K. appears to be the most natural partner in this perspective. France and the U.K. are the most active European powers in terms of defence, and they have engaged in an ambitious bilateral cooperation since the 2010 Lancaster House agreements. Moreover, the U.K. too has close defence partnership with India, including in the naval field with the Konkan exercises. Hence trilateral exercises between the Indian, British and French navies could prove beneficial to these countries in the development of a maritime security rapprochement between India and Europe in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

Since 1998, the Franco-Indian relationship has become increasingly strategic. The Indo-French strategic dialogue has been widened. This could be seen from the annual joint military exercises which have grown each year. When Modi and French President Francois Hollande met earlier this spring a new era was foreseen. On this basis both leaders should

realize the importance of the Indian Ocean region because both countries' have strategic interests. At a grand strategic level, France and India's interests in the Indian Ocean are closely associated. Both countries have historically played a proactive humanitarian role throughout the region. They are concerned over the risks of sea-borne nuclear proliferation. The two countries have similar core values when it comes to freedom of navigation. France's interest in bearing peace and stability in the Indian Ocean is well summarized in the 2013 French White Paper, which describes the Indian Ocean as a "transit region for international trade, and "at the heart of world strategic challenges." France also recognizes that the Indian Ocean Region's strategic equilibrium can only be truly maintained once India has emerged as a more powerful naval actor. The annual Varuna naval exercises between India and France should therefore be treated that France presence in the region is to develop confidence building, measures among the states.

In future, the Persian Gulf will likely to be a conflict prone region and there will be an increased military competition. Despite reported progress in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, still the problem persists and disturb the Indian Ocean region. Though, New Delhi, recognise the ability of the Obama administration which has made efforts to stem the flow of sectarian violence in the region, and durably prevent further nuclear proliferation. It might be more judicious for second-tier democratic powers to come closer so that they can more effectively coordinate their strategies and policies. Therefore, a more institutionalized strategic dialogue between India and France with regard to Persian Gulf security could be possible in the Indian Ocean region. Lastly but not least, both the countries should seek to increase their cooperation in the field of maritime domain awareness and intelligence gathering. In earnest, it is advisable for both France and India's diplomatic and intelligence communities to better coordinate on the challenge posed by dual-use infrastructure, particularly in Eastern Africa and the Southwestern Indian Ocean.

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