

Locating Vanilla Islands in India–Africa Defence Cooperation

*Radhey Tambi**

With the emerging dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region (IPR), the Indian Ocean region (IOR) and its littorals have gained tremendous geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic significance. Extending from the East Coast of Africa to the Western shores of Australia, the region forms India's backyard and immediate maritime neighbourhood. Thus, keeping it intact and secure remains vital for India's role as a custodian and a leading player in the region.

Although the region comprises 1197 islands, the study restricts itself to four key East African islands, that is, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, and Mauritius due to their strategic location near the chokepoints. The study will attempt to understand how India can leverage these island states to further enhance its presence and leadership role in the region as a net security provider, including capability-building, military assistance, and military diplomacy. It will further delve into the challenges faced by island states such as managing large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); efficient, economic, and timely HADR activities; sea borne terrorism; and piracy, and will explore how New Delhi has proved to be an asset. And finally, it will assess the steps that India must take to enhance defence cooperation with the East African Islands in the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: *India, Africa, East African Islands, Defence Cooperation*

* Ms Radhey Tambi is a Research Associate at Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

THE PAST

The re-emergence of island diplomacy in India's foreign policy has been concurrent with the rise of the Indo-Pacific as an integrated geopolitical region. The factoring of the ambitious rise of China, the increasing presence of distant powers, and challenges posed by non-military threats are major causes of churning in the IOR. Amidst, all this there is no doubt that India's leadership role with material capabilities and regional defence engagements with its island partners adds to the evolving dynamics. The kernel of the diplomatic depth of New Delhi is reflected in the style, symbolism, and substance in each of the high-level visits undertaken to and from the Vanilla Islands (this article will include Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Comoros, leaving Mayotte and Reunion islands of France) in the western Indian Ocean (WIO). Whether it was PM Modi's visit to Seychelles and Mauritius in 2015 or Vice President Naidu's visit to Comoros in 2019. The importance of the ties can be seen by the fact that Mauritius PM Pravind Kumar Jugnauth chose New Delhi as his first destination for a state visit in 2022. This speaks volumes about India's regional efforts in taking along its island partners and vice-versa in the WIO.

In this context, the commemoration of fifteen years of India–Africa defence cooperation in 2023 has arrived at a historic time, when India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant has hit the seas and is ready to take the operations further. At the same time, India's defence minister, Rajnath Singh posited at the 2022 edition of the India–Africa Defence Expo that 'India and Africa are important stakeholders in ensuring a safe and secure maritime environment, especially in the Indian Ocean Region.'¹ Thus, pointing toward the shared role of India and Africa in maintaining peace, prosperity, and progress in the region. In this background, deepening defence ties with the islands in the WIO will be a stepping stone to opportunity.

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE WIO IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY GEOPOLITICS

There is no denying the fact that the vitality of the Indian Ocean in trade, technology, and investment is shaping the contours of the global order with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a quintessential theatre of geopolitics. Forming a semi-circular arc, the geography encompasses East Africa, West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and some parts of Australia. Being the third largest ocean, the region is flecked with several islands and

chokepoints, the concentration of which is highest in its western part, which is juxtaposed with the Eastern coast of Africa.

The strategic location of the WIO on the maritime highway allows it to act as a trade link between the East and the West. The region stands as an interface between the African continent on the West and the larger Indian Ocean on the East, thereby overlooking several entry and exit points to the Indian Ocean. The trade carried through sea lanes passes through chokepoints such as Bab-el-Mandeb (connecting the Suez Canal to the Gulf of Aden), the Mozambique Channel (located between the Southeast African countries of Madagascar and Mozambique), and the Cape of Good Hope (sea route around Southern part of Africa) in the western Indian Ocean. According to the US Energy Information Administration flow of crude oil, condensate, and refined petroleum products from Bab-el-Mandeb was 6.2 million b/d in 2018, and this is bound to increase further due to the increase in demand from the countries in East, and Europe.²

What further adds to the economic importance of the East African islands near the Mozambique Channel and Cape of Good Hope is that these routes form an alternative to the Suez Canal route, which is the shortest link between the East and the West. The importance of these routes for global trade was witnessed during the recent incident when Ship Ever Given was stuck in the Suez Canal, which caused the re-routing of several ships around the Cape of Good Hope and a backlog of more than 400 ships.³ Any impediment along these trading routes will severely disrupt the economy not only of the global South but also the global North, which is dependent on them. The strategic location of East African Islands also known as Vanilla Islands (due to the plantation of Vanilla pods) around these chokepoints offers a location to ensure secure trade and transit through and from the region.

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the movement of cargo from the ports of Comoros, Mozambique, Mauritius, and Madagascar will grow tremendously by 2030 due to the implementation of the Africa Free Trade Agreement.⁴ The presence of rare earth minerals and hydrocarbons in and around the islands zooms out their significance. For instance, Madagascar has the sixth largest reserve of rare earth elements in the form of Columbo-tantalates. The Bemolanga deposit in Madagascar contains 9.9 billion barrels of recoverable oil, while its own requirement is just 15,000 barrels per day, thus signalling a great export potential.⁵ The Rovuma Basin in the Mozambique Channel has an estimate of over 100 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, which is by far the largest ever.⁶ The waters around Seychelles are rich in oil reserves. However, the economic

potential of the island countries is limited by their capacity and capability to extract these resources at competitive prices and engage with the world.

Geopolitically, the WIO islands associate themselves with an African identity, and all four are members of the African Union. Where Mauritius and Seychelles are classified as high-income economies by the World Bank, Comoros, and Madagascar are middle-income and low-income countries respectively. Despite the economic disparities, what is common to all four island nations is their strategic location astride the key maritime chokepoints in the WIO, converging with their maritime identity. Both these features add to the strategic dimension of these islands and necessitate them as stepping stones for countries whose resources traverse their vicinity to ensure their supplies of raw materials and finished products are safe. Especially, when the threat of non-military challenges like natural disasters, sea-based terrorism, and organised crime is looming large.

Further, as the maritime domain is gaining prominence in the shaping of the world order, countries with sizeable amounts of military reach, eye the islands as table tops to project power and use them to extend their reach and interoperability. More often, islands also serve as important grounds for logistics facilities and communication bases in large oceans. This can be seen in the US having a base in Diego Garcia on the Chagos archipelago of Mauritius. There are also claims that with the increasing economic, military, diplomatic, and institutional forays of China into the Indian Ocean, it is seeking a base in Comoros or either of the WIO countries. This reveals the importance of the region for China. As the competition between the US and China displaces more water in the Pacific Ocean, its undercurrents will be felt in the Indian Ocean too. Thereby reinforcing the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic importance of the Indian Ocean and its chief constituents, the island countries, for India which is centrally located in this geography.

PARAMOUNTCY OF THE ISLANDS FOR INDIA

India's relation with the quadrilateral of the four East African islands in the WIO dates back to the time when Indians were taken as slaves and indentured labourers by different colonial powers at different time periods in history. Later as their generations settled, they also played an important role in the freedom movement of some of these island states like Mauritius,⁷ and eventually occupied significant positions in the higher echelons of society. This has helped develop deep people-to-people ties and cultural links with the Vanilla Islands. During the Cold War, the IOR was relatively peaceful

and free from great power rivalries as compared to the other parts of the world. However, with the changing dynamics of the global order, which has brought the significance of the Indo-Pacific region to the fore, the Indian Ocean has become increasingly important.

The increasing vitality of the islands as seen in the previous section is driving the attention of the major powers of the world towards this region. New Delhi enjoys historical relationships, diasporic ties, and cultural and religious affinity with the Vanilla Islands. Only a secure, stable, and prosperous neighbourhood can ensure the rise of the region and India. However, the islands in the WIO face internal political challenges, as well as external impediments like drug smuggling, terrorism in various forms, protection of EEZ and marine ecosystem, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Due to the lack of deep pockets for social welfare among the island countries, India's role in enhancing the capacity and capability building of its partners in the same periphery is demanded and essential.

Further, as the Indian Ocean is emerging as a new platform for major powers to deploy their latest, most capable, and advanced forces, it raises questions on the future of the kind of regional security architecture that we as Indians and our neighbours will be sitting in. Will security be provided by the littoral countries, or will the extra-regional players have a greater say in the region, which has been quite apprehensive of any outside presence after being colonised for several decades? And amidst these dynamics how can India make sure that the region remains outside the undue interference of great power competition, yet ensures a stable and secure neighbourhood? It will be by ensuring an enduring economic, diplomatic, military, and institutional engagement in the region where it is seen as a security umbrella for peace and security.⁸

The time is behind us when the small island states were considered significant only for their votes in the UN General Assembly. Instead today they have emerged as significant platforms for cooperation. In a world where everybody is taking a haircut to create a landing space, and all feet are on the accelerator it becomes the responsibility of India to apply brakes and shape the order of things to come.⁹ Most of the island states demand significant developments in the fulfilment of sustainable development goals (SDGs), mitigating climate change and disaster management, resilient infrastructure, renewable energy and management of the blue economy, and protection of their EEZs. In addition to these, there is a demand for digital payment mechanisms and cyber security as newer areas to cooperate. Concomitantly, these are also the areas in which India has made considerable progress and

thus has an advantage. India has also earned goodwill by being a hardliner of strategic autonomy and a staunch supporter of sovereignty. Any further engagement will not only widen the grounds of convergence between New Delhi and WIO islands but also enhance south-south cooperation.

Economically, reaching out to the island nations will be a win-win situation for both sides. It will allow India to facilitate interlinkage and interdependency with its close neighbours thereby diversifying the market options for their products in India and vice-versa.¹⁰ Many of the products required by these countries like agricultural commodities, medical instruments and appliances, and refined petroleum are produced in excess quantities and at lesser prices in India. This also has the ability to create an alternative supply chain in the region with a regional power, thereby checkmating other proximate powers.

Strategically, increasing Chinese inroads through its gargantuan Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project and its maritime component Maritime Silk Road has raised concerns for India. Increasing Chinese footprints have the ability to reduce space for India in its own backyard. Some of the important Chinese initiatives in WIO include capitalising on the gas reserves of the Mozambique channel. China's National Petroleum Company has invested nearly US\$ 4.2 bn thereby making it the biggest ever investment in overseas natural gas fields,¹¹ signing a Free Trade Agreement with Mauritius (first African country to do so). Chinese presence is also increasing rapidly in Comoros, which sits over the Northern Mozambique channel, near the Suez Canal.

It has emerged as the largest developmental partner of Comoros and is undertaking significant infrastructure projects like the construction of roads, highways, housing projects, and laying fiber optic cables. A Chinese company is building Port Moheli and a green field deep water port at Sereheni, in addition to the expansion of airports at Moroni and Anjouan.¹² Such gigantic infrastructure projects in an island country that China considers a 'Country of the Moon' with a small population base might have military implications in the future. Above all, China is the only country apart from France that has diplomatic missions in all the Vanilla Islands. Being a distant power with so much influence and standing in a region, that forms the periphery of India is something New Delhi needs to be watchful and careful about, and must pull all its strings for.

Considering East Africa as the gateway to the African continent and recalibrating its ties with the East African island states will allow New Delhi to play a leadership role in the region. Amidst the shifting sands of geopolitics and geoeconomics, India's approach towards the continent should be guided

by being a strong net security provider with a focus on enhancing capacity building, military diplomacy, military assistance, humanitarian aid and disaster relief and supporting search and rescue operations, hydrographic surveys and salvage operations. Before the small islands become the bases for outside powers to project influence and shape the security environment at the cost of losing their sovereignty, India must reach out to them through defence cooperation, which can help them sail through the challenging tides of the IOR.

LEVERAGING ISLANDS AS A NET SECURITY PROVIDER IN THE WIO REGION

In its 2015, Maritime Security Strategy and 2022 Doctrine of the Indian Air Force, the WIO is identified as the primary area of responsibility for the Indian military. Therefore, it remains central to India's political, economic, and security interests. The various ways to leverage the island territories include diplomacy and infrastructural development, information dominance, military cooperation, and economic linkages (acronym DIME). The paper will focus only on defence engagement with the islands in East Africa. There is no doubt that India with its exceptional leadership role in the region has earned the credentials of being the first responder, in which an exceptional role is played by the Indian Air Force and Navy. However, the credentials of being a 'net security provider' requires to be understood at a significant depth.

According to the Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015, the term 'net security provider' means the state of actual security available in an area, on balancing prevailing threats, inherent risks and rising challenges in the maritime environment, against the ability to monitor, contain and counter all of these. It encompasses four different activities, namely military training; military diplomacy; military assistance; and direct deployment of the military forces. Military training involves capacity building either on foreign soil or on domestic grounds under various institutions. In this regard, India has played quite an active and stellar role in building and enhancing the capability of islands in the WIO. For example, lately, INS Trikand and Mumbai provided training to the Comoros Coast Guard on firefighting, bridge-manship and handling of small weapons.¹³

The second pillar of military diplomacy includes port visits, calls and conducting exercises, all of which help in building strong bilateral ties and partnerships. For instance, India regularly conducts the joint exercise

LAMITIYE with Seychelles, with the most recent one being focused on interoperability in the semi-urban environment.¹⁴ As part of the long-range deployment, INS Trishul visited Port Anjouan, Comoros in May–June 2023¹⁵ It aided the Comorian Coast Guard in repairs of communication equipment and Navigation Radar Display.¹⁶

Military assistance simply means providing military weapons and equipment like patrol vessels and aircraft to aid and assist the island nations in securing themselves. Since independence, India maintained some sort of ambiguity in this direction. However, in recent times, New Delhi has changed this attitude and is diversifying its defence exports. Last but not the least, military deployment means putting boots on the ground during environmental disasters, HADR activities, or evacuation of citizens from conflict-prone areas or fighting themselves.

Looking at these four pillars, it is important to assess India's role as a proximate power to the four east African islands. Even though the concept of net security provider was first used by the Americans in the Indian context in 2009 at the Shangri La Dialogue when the then US Secretary of State Robert Gates addressed India as the net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.¹⁷ The reality and the historical experiences show that India has been undertaking many of these activities before the conceptualisation of the term.

But what needs greater attention and focus today is how well India has been performing under each of these pillars. While there is no denying the fact that New Delhi has done remarkably well in military training and diplomacy, several structural impediments like ideological moorings based on the concept of non-violence, factious domestic politics, and lack of the performance and capacity constraints of the defence industry, and largely of the economy have restricted India's role in military assistance and deployment.¹⁸ We have covered only half the distance. Another half remains before we can correctly use the term net security provider in the region for ourselves. Further, with a lack of deep pockets, how far do we stretch the term security even in its military sense? To this end, can India provide an assurance mechanism. If yes, then to what extent and to how many, when its own coffers are limited?¹⁹

CHALLENGES VERSUS INDIA'S RESPONSES THROUGH DEFENCE COOPERATION

The old peaceful order of the Indian Ocean is on the cusp of challenges due to inter-state competition between the US and China to a greater extent, and also due to India–China to a lesser extent. The security architecture

is further affected by a plethora of non-traditional security challenges like climate change and consequential disasters and mitigation activities, piracy and armed robbery, small arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and sea-based terrorism, amongst many others.

In this scenario, the state of small island states is further deteriorated due to the maritime nature of their location, which has blessed them with large coastlines but with a limited population. Extended coastline comes with certain advantages like the potential for tourism due to clean and serene beaches, more resources to lay hands on due to larger EEZs, and prospects for port activities. However, the capacity, both in terms of population and resources is limited with the island nations to manage such large and porous maritime borders.

Further, the multifaceted infrastructure for banking, finance, schooling, shipping, and air services is also located along the coast. The success of all these sectors is dependent on the safety and security of the oceans. However, managing the oceans' security and health is heavy on capital and skills both of which are in limited availability with the island nations, thus necessitating them to look outwards towards the regional or global players for cooperation. These structural limitations limit their ability to govern large maritime spaces. For this, they need partners who can fill this gap without seeking to unduly undermine their freedom of policy choices.²⁰

In this regard, India has emerged as a primary enabler in protecting the maritime environment, marine infrastructure, and resources. New Delhi has also earned considerable goodwill by being conscious of the demand of its island neighbours, while at the same time respecting their sovereignty to ensure peace and security in the Indian Ocean. This idea is well reflected in India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, which brings together the security and economic development of the Indian Ocean littorals. It also focuses on the cooperation between the Coast Guard agencies to counter challenges like piracy, drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and organised crime at sea. All of these require effective, efficient, and responsible surveillance of the EEZs of the island nations. Thus, defence engagement and security cooperation have emerged as an important pillar of India–Vanilla islands ties.

Under the bilateral defence cooperation with Madagascar in 2018, India and Madagascar conducted the first-ever joint patrolling of the Malagasy EEZ and PASSEX by INS Shardul and the Malagasy Naval ship 'Trozona' in March 2021.²¹ To further strengthen its surveillance ability in the western Indian Ocean, India opened its first listening post on foreign soil in Northern

Madagascar. Mauritius also known as Mini India (more than 60 per cent of the population belongs to Indian origin), is one of the largest importers of Indian weapons in Africa. In fact, the National Security Advisor of Mauritius is always an Indian personnel. India also operates the coast guard of Mauritius, and thus regularly conducts surveillance of its EEZ. As maritime domain awareness is key to the security and growth of the islands, India exported its first indigenously built warship to Mauritius in 2013. India has also given a large number of patrol vessels to Seychelles namely Topaz, Constant, Hermes, and the most recent Zoroaster.

Mostly surviving on wafer-thin margins, small island nations do not have enough money and expertise to undertake maintenance of existing fleets, aircraft, and vessels. Also, it is nearly impossible for them to buy a new vessel or boat every time. However, India possesses the art of maintenance, which proves to be an asset for them. Indian Navy ship INS Kesari extended technical assistance in repairing a grounded patrol vessel of Comoros Coast Guard, P002-M Kombozi.²² Again in June 2023, INS Trishul undertook a long-range deployment at Port Anjouan to undertake a training workshop on the maintenance of OBMs for Comorian Coast Guard Personnel, in addition to the repairs undertaken for communications equipment and Navigation Radar display.²³

Tectonically, the Indian Ocean is the youngest and most complex among the major oceans of the world, thus making it more prone to natural disasters like tsunamis and cyclones. Further, climate change has become a reality. It has the potential to pose immense challenges to maritime governance and international law, which in turn has the potential to have significant political, societal, economic, security and environmental implications. Various climate-induced events in the Indian Ocean like the increase in natural disasters (especially cyclones and coastal flooding), ocean acidification, depletion of coral reefs and coastal wetlands, and shift in baselines due to sea level rise will have significant maritime security implications for the region. The increase in temperature across the Indian Ocean and especially in the WIO has the potential to alter the monsoon circulation of the entire Asia, which will also alter the marine food webs.

According to the first-ever assessment of climate change over the Indian region undertaken by the Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India, as compared to the global average sea surface temperature (SST) rise of 0.7 degree Celsius the tropical Indian Ocean has witnessed an increase of 1 degree Celsius from 1951 to 2015. Thus, pointing towards increasing heat content in the upper levels of the ocean waters, which will further increase

the vulnerability of tropical cyclones.²⁴ Despite the frequent tropical cyclones coming down, the frequency of very severe cyclonic storms has increased significantly over the Indian Ocean.²⁵

This means more disasters, more losses, and more assistance and cooperation required from the regional and global players. Under mission-based deployments, combat-ready ships of the Indian Navy are deployed in the WIO to undertake HADR missions, policing, search and rescue, and maintaining order.²⁶ For instance, under 'Operation Vanilla' Indian Navy and Airforce played a commendable role in humanitarian aid and assistance after the devastation caused by Cyclone Diane in Madagascar.²⁷ Indian Navy was also the first responder to the MV Wakashio oil spill off the Mauritius coast in 2020.

The morphology of the Indian Ocean is quite complex with a wide continental shelf, uneven topography, and numerous volcanic ridges. The northwest quadrant is rich in resources like hydrocarbon reserves, tin, and diamond. But they have been surveyed only at the reconnaissance level. To ensure effective maritime navigation, marine construction, dredging, and oil and mineral exploration, it is important to undertake efficacious hydrographic surveys in the region. The lack of technology and skilled manpower in the island states allows India to partner with the islands in East Africa which will lead to mutual development. In 2022, India's Chief of Naval Staff presented a navigation chart of Port Victoria, prepared by the National Hydrographic Office (NHO) under the MoU on hydrographic cooperation to Seychelles.²⁸

The hydrographic surveys are also important to undertake any offshore or onshore activities, be it tourism, finding fertile fishing grounds, port design and development, or cable laying operation. In November 2022, INS Darshak was deployed by India to conduct hydrographic surveys to identify potential fishing zones for placement of fish aggregator devices and surveys across the Agalaega and St. Brandon in Mauritius.²⁹ This ship of the Indian Navy is equipped with various latest equipment like SONAR, helicopters, various motor boats, and even a hospital ship to provide assistance to the people during natural disasters.³⁰ The successful efforts of both countries in hydrography have led to the publication of eleven navigational charts and thirteen electronic navigational charts, out of which eight have been internationally recognised.

Though piracy has considerably reduced in the WIO region especially around the Horn of Africa due to successive and successful initiatives by regional and global players. But the unstable political and economic system

in some of the littoral countries, and lack of legally binding norms leave a gap for it to relapse. The situation is further critical and worrisome in the Mozambique channel, through which passes nearly 30 per cent of the global container traffic. The 1000 nm long watercourse has emerged as a security hotspot in the Southwest Indian Ocean due to challenges like insurgency, drug smuggling from Afghanistan, piracy and expanding terror groups all along the coastline.³¹ This has called several other countries and organizations to provide security cover to the region due to the limited capacity of the surrounding states.

To this end, the Indian Navy has played a seminal role in curbing piracy, not only by enhancing the capabilities of its island partners but also by providing escorting services to the ship carrying cargo, food, and other supplies through piracy infested waters. As India has taken on the role of net security provider in the region, military training to the deficient littoral states provides an imperative for India to take the leadership role of the region with greater responsibility. To ensure such accountability India has sent two member navy delegations to conduct special training for Malagasy commandoes in 2019, a five-member Indian Navy Mobile Training Team imparted 14 days of training to 50 officers from the Malagasy special forces in 2021, and another five members in October 2022.³²

To deal with many of the non-traditional challenges, island countries require vigilant, effective, and efficient surveillance of their maritime zones. To this end, the role of information is necessary. India has made some considerable strides in this direction to span an information network in the region. In 2018, the government launched the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) to better address challenges like piracy, drug smuggling, and human trafficking. It enmeshes the information collected from the chain of coastal radar networks, which then reaches different centers in Mumbai and Kochi. Mauritius and Seychelles are covered under the coastal surveillance radar network. To further allow a common understanding over issues like piracy and armed robbery, human and contraband trafficking, IUU fishing, arms running, poaching, and maritime terrorism in the Western Indian Ocean Indian Navy affiliated IFC-IOR inked an MoU with Seychelles based Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in February 2023.³³ RCOC is one of the primary organizations responsible for maintaining the security architecture of the WIO, apart from the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and the Regional Maritime Infusion Centre (RMIC). This will enable sharing of data related to the identity of ships and non-military commercial vessels. In fact, on the Independence day

of Seychelles in 2022, India delivered two engines of Dornier Aircraft and engineering spares through INS Kolkata.³⁴

Despite India's proactive security engagements with the island nations in the WIO, which mainly encompasses capacity building and capability creation through the transfer of defence equipment. There still remain certain limitations to fully exploit India's credibility as a residential power in the Indian Ocean. First and foremost, whatever defence transfers India is undertaking with the island nations are from its own kitty and inventory as posited by a (Retd) Vice Admiral of the Indian Navy.³⁵ This means that instead of manufacturing something new, especially for the requirements of the islands, India is instead depleting its own resources, which is in itself a dangerous move. This can cost the security of a nation at large. The problem of producing advanced weaponry at a competitive price within a reasonable time frame continues to plague the Indian defence industry. It remains to be seen whether under *Atmanirbharta*, India will be able to accomplish this task or not.

Second, is the limitation of defence attachés. They play an important role in undertaking intelligence gathering, administrative support like port calls, monitor the progress of defence related projects, liaising with relevant local agencies to ensure smooth conduct of military exercises, and also creating a positive image of India. All of this requires close coordination between diplomats and military personnel. The importance of civil-military integration was rightly brought out by India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar when he posited that 'It is only through the osmosis of continuous interaction that diplomats will understand defence and security better, just as soldiers will develop a good understanding of the world politics'.³⁶ Lastly, sometimes factors outside India's control also affect its role in the region. For instance, due to political crises and related instability, any kind of aid and assistance was suspended in Madagascar till 2014.³⁷ Comoros had 20 coups till April 2023 from the time it got independence from France in the 1970s. Such political turmoil affects the foreign relations of a country deeply.

FUTURE PROGNOSIS

Despite the above limitations, there is a lot of scope for India–Africa defence cooperation to prosper. India is engaged in a huge amount of transfers and gifts of equipment, which enhances the capability of the island states to deal with a significant number of challenges, especially emanating from the sea. In the process, India must ensure that it provides them with modest and state-of-

the-art weaponry like advanced drones, patrol vessels and aircraft, choppers, high-speed interceptor boats, and small arms. Apart from these, New Delhi must also capitalise on providing night vision devices, uniforms, and shoes to the island countries. It should fuse them with the latest technology to make them more efficient for its African partners. To this end, geotechnology will be a big step in matching India's aspirations to its commitments in the IOR. Otherwise, it will leave a gap for any other country with better weaponry to fill that space, which will considerably reduce strategic space for India.

Second, currently, India's military exercises are very limited with the East African island nations. More military exercises must be undertaken with them, focusing on anti-piracy, HADR activities, or sea-based terrorism. These remain a common ground for both India and island nations, and thus it will increase interoperability between the forces, thereby enhancing operational readiness. In this context, instead of just focusing on bilateral exercises, it can be made into an inter-island activity that brings together all the Vanilla Islands. It will foster more cooperation and benefit all due to the transnational nature of challenges.

Third, to accomplish the export target of weapons to the African nations, India needs to increase the number of military attachés to the countries in the WIO region and in particular the island countries. This can happen by increasing the number of diplomatic missions in the island countries that support the military attachés. Attachés help in promoting defence exports by knowing the specific demands of the nations, which can then be manufactured in the country. In this regard, the role of the Navy and Air Force attaches should be underlined due to their swiftness, mobility, and reach. They are important to not only extend our reach but also to create a favourable and positive image of India. Currently, there is no air attaché in the IOR. The nearest is Tanzania in the East and the Philippines in the West.

Fourth, inter-staff talks and long training courses should be conducted. Toward this end, a cluster of the island groups can be formed with the headquarters located amongst any of the island nations, and not New Delhi necessarily to provide police training, hydrographic capability training, and coastal surveillance with advanced technology fitted equipment.

Fifth, the development gap and the overwhelming influence of China in the four East African islands leave a significant vacuum for India to get along with like-minded partners in the region to undertake triangular development. To this end, several partnerships can be exploited like India–Australia–France all of which are littorals of the Indian Ocean, with France having territories and significant influence in the Western Indian Ocean, while India and

Australia are the bookends. An area that can be explored is the protection of the subsea cables as pointed out in a report released by the Australian National University.³⁸

INDIA'S WAY FORWARD

India's relationship with the islands of East Africa today stands at a comfortable juncture where they have immense faith and confidence in India to play the role of a leading net security provider in the region. It is time for New Delhi to reciprocate the goodwill bestowed, through its active and assertive role in the IOR. In the past, India and Africa fought against imperialism and colonialism. Today, they need to come together to deal with common security issues to build a stable and peaceful Indian Ocean region.

As India is sitting on the global high table in organisations like QUAD, SCO, G-20, Colombo Security Conclave, observer in the Indian Ocean Commission, it should use the opportunity to create a brand for India in its immediate maritime neighbourhood, which is sustainable and inclusive. Defence cooperation will play a significant role in India's rise, and as it makes the world ready for India. 'Atmanirbharta' in defence manufacturing will be truly realised when India is able to fulfil the defence requirements of its friends sitting in the same region as India while dealing with common security challenges. A secure region can only prosper economically, politically, diplomatically, technologically, and institutionally, which can be built with the complementary role of India and the small island developing states through collective responsibility.

NOTES

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