

Is India a Geopolitical Force in the Indian Ocean Region?

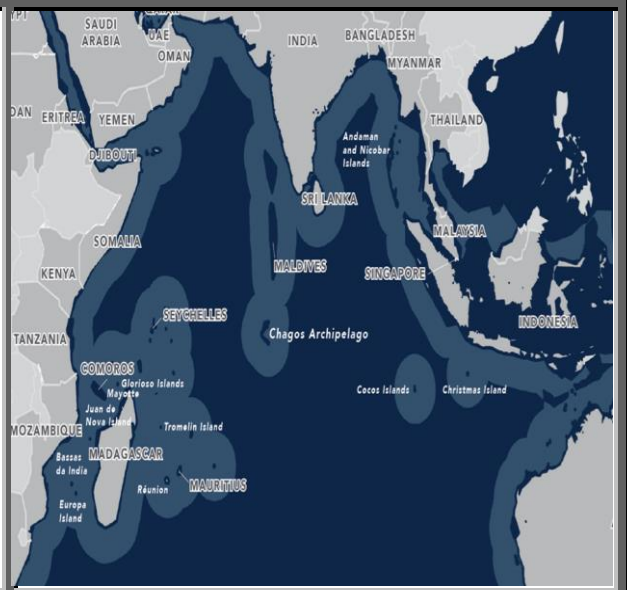
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



India has been elevating its foothold in the Indian Ocean aimed at maritime force posturing for the past two decades.¹ The Indian Navy identifies the whole of the Indian Ocean geographically expanding from the eastern coast of Africa to the Andaman Sea near Malaysia as a priority region. The Indo-U.S. strategic partnership is aimed at boosting Indian military modernization to strengthen New Delhi's influence in this region. India currently neither possesses the military might nor the willpower to counter China, especially for the U.S., due to its limited strength and overall capacities. Nevertheless, there seems to be optimism in Washington that India would be able to act as a 'counter-weight' to China once it achieves somewhat military parity with China. Many in Washington are aiming for this goal and are encouraging India's potential for achieving this task. Until that time comes, New Delhi has been hedging its bet carefully, especially in the Indian Ocean Region.

Indian Naval Base in Mauritius

¹ Darshana M. Baruah, Nitya Labh and Jessica Greely, "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/06/15/mapping-indian-ocean-region-pub-89971>

India has recently built a naval base with a major airstrip and a jetty on the Agaléga island of Mauritius. Prospects of this naval base were initiated through an MoU signed between the two governments in 2015. Agaléga Island has about 300 residents that live off coconuts and fish for generations.² Mauritius, a Hindu-majority island country, is expected to host about 50 Indian Naval officers and guards to staff the newly developed naval base. The base can handle Boeing P-8I, an American maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft for surveillance and anti-submarine warfare. This indicates that India is strengthening its abilities to conduct surveillance and expand its influence on the Eastern end of the Indian Ocean Region where Chinese commercial and military activities have gained strength over the past 25 years. China also has a naval base in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa. An Indian offshore naval base close to a Chinese offshore naval base increases the chances of (unintended/accidental) escalation. However, it is unlikely that India would take direct measures to counter or interrupt Chinese movement in the Western region of the Indian Ocean. India has been attempting to expand its influence in the Southwest Indian Ocean region by hoping to develop an airstrip and naval jetty at Assumption Island of Seychelles, a strategic location between Tanzania and Mozambique. However, in 2018, India was forced to shelve this plan on account of opposition from the political parties in Seychelles. This shows that though India could not garner support in the region to ensure a strong foothold, it has managed to develop a naval base after significant delays in expanding its military outreach on the Western end of the Indian Ocean Region.

² "India Develops Military Base In Mauritius To Counter Chinese Presence," *ADF*, October 10, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/10/india-develops-military-base-in-mauritius-to-counter-chinese-presence/#:~:text=India%20recently%20built%20a%20major,of%20the%20Indian%20Armed%20Forces.>

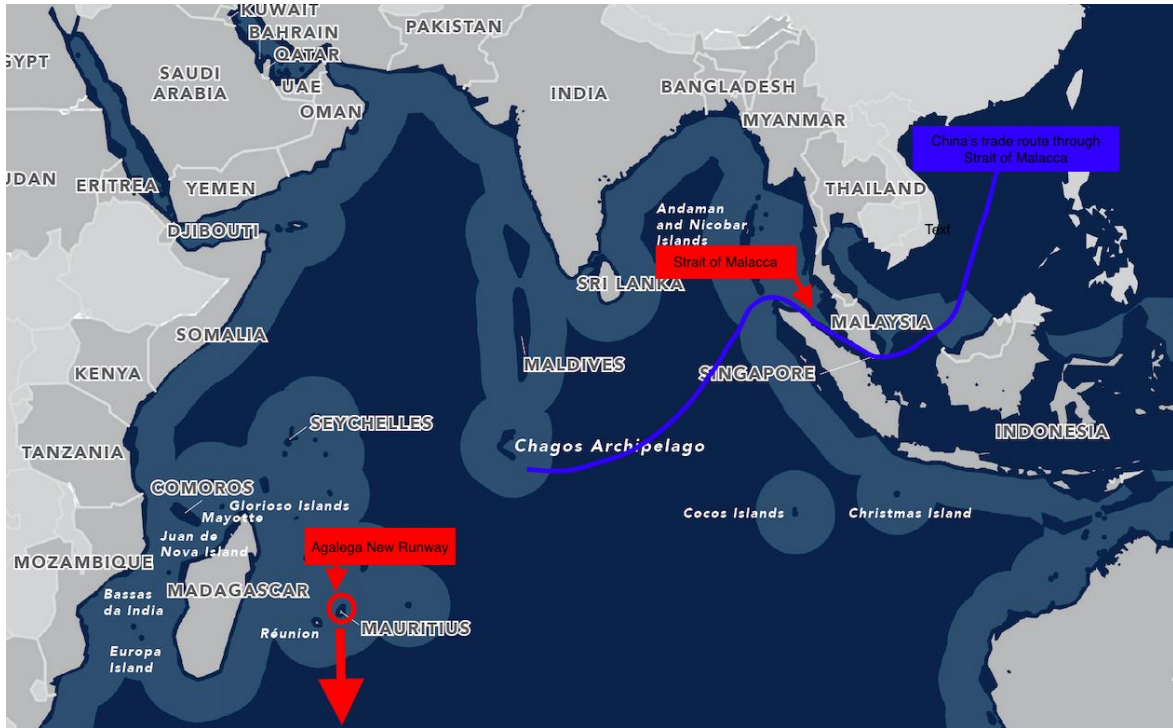


Figure 1: Agaléga island of Mauritius and Strait of Malacca

Source: Author edited the image from Darshana M. Baruah, Nitya Labh and Jessica Greely, "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region."

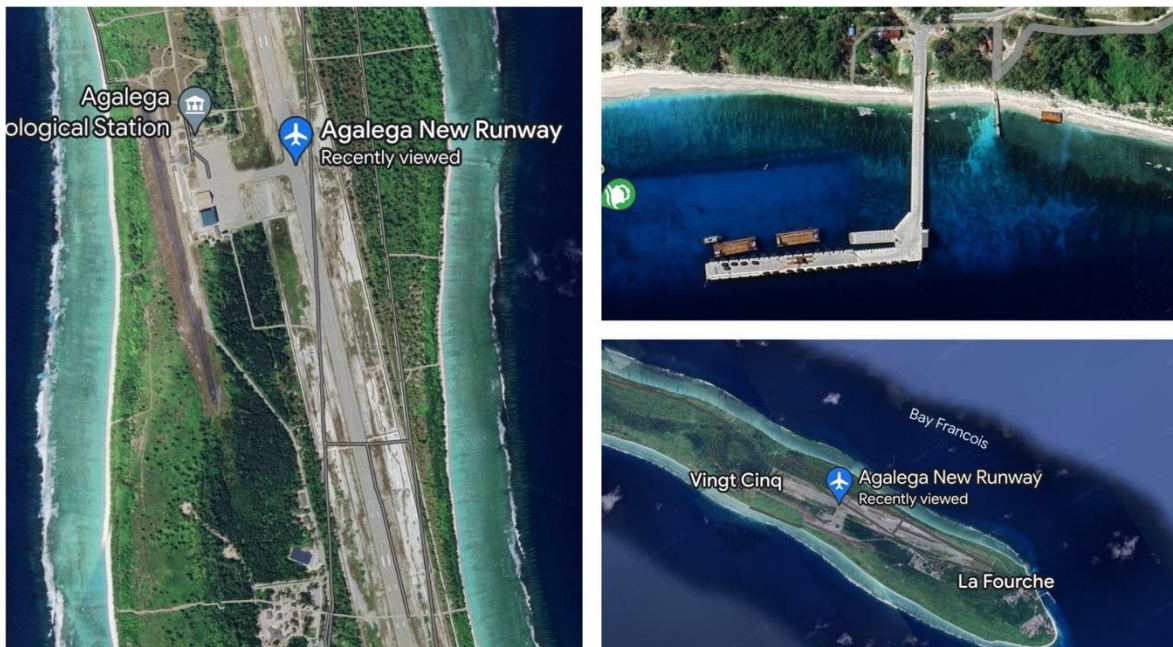


Figure 2: Agaléga New Runway and Jetty

Source: Google Maps 2023, collected by author

Blockade of Strait of Malacca

India has also been attempting to expand its influence on the Eastern end of the Indian Ocean region. Many times, it is argued for 'deterrence by denial' and 'deterrence by punishment' as a way to disrupt the Chinese movement in the 'Indo-Pacific' region. While deterrence by punishment might escalate to a war that India would likely lose, some experts have argued for a naval blockade of the Strait of Malacca as a viable option under the ambit of 'deterrence by denial'.³ Due to rising tensions and the potential of conflict over Taiwan between the U.S. and China, questions have been raised about whether India can park some ships in the Strait of Malacca to disrupt the Chinese supply chain.⁴ Such arguments have been rejected on the grounds of geographical distance, challenges under international law, and possible lack of support from Pacific states that use the Strait for their commercial activities.⁵ A blockade of the Strait can be bypassed by China as other route options are available such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) or China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁶ These arguments are based on logical recommendations for any country to refrain from embroiling into a conflict that does not directly harm their sovereignty. These arguments may be valid for any other country that is not attempting to expand its regional influence; however, they do not seem justifiable in case India is attempting to expand its regional influence and eyeing a more global role. The arguments rather indicate that India is not ready to exercise strategic influence beyond its geographical proximity. Observers believe that an escalation between China and India in the border area could have more solid rationale for retaliation by either party as it would be a direct threat to their sovereignty; however, this does not apply to the Indian Ocean, where the two states are not engaged in any conflict that impinges on their sovereignty. Although India is eagerly ramping up its

³ H I Sutton, "Could The Indian Navy Strangle China's Lifeline In The Malacca Strait?," *Forbes*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/07/08/could-the-indian-navy-strangle-chinas-lifeline-in-the-malacca-strait/?sh=44f9219078e8>; Arzan Tarapore, "India should prioritise a denial strategy in the Indian Ocean," *The Interpreter*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-should-prioritise-denial-strategy-indian-ocean>; Mohan Guruswamy, "Is India ready for a bigger war with China? India can dominate the skies and the sea," *National Herald*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/is-india-ready-for-a-bigger-war-with-china-india-can-dominate-the-skies-and-the-sea>; Happymon Jacob, "To Check China, India Must Develop a Maritime Grand Strategy," *The Wire on YouTube*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaiDCloYTcc>

⁴ H I Sutton, "Could The Indian Navy Strangle China's Lifeline In The Malacca Strait?"

⁵ Sujan Chinoy, "Taiwan, a Malacca blockade and India's options," *The Hindu*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/taiwan-a-malacca-blockade-and-indias-options/article67513857.ece>; Krzysztof Iwanek, "Why Even in a Crisis India May Not Block Maritime Trade With China," *The Diplomat*, February 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/why-even-in-a-crisis-india-may-not-block-maritime-trade-with-china/>

⁶ Riyaz ul Khaliq, "China's foreign minister urges haste in building economic corridor with Myanmar," *Anadolu Ajansi*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/chinas-foreign-minister-urges-haste-in-building-economic-corridor-with-myanmar/2886699>; "Chinese envoy discusses economic cooperation," *Tribune*, November 24, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2447773/chinese-envoy-discusses-economic-cooperation>

naval expenditure and fleet modernization, the logic of engaging China as well as the littoral warfare capability of the Indian Navy are limited. This points to why India would not embroil itself in a U.S.-China conflict in the 'Indo-Pacific' region, which is simply because of fear of losing.

BIMSTEC AND IORA

India has been attempting to command the Indian Ocean region through platforms like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)⁷ and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)⁸. Despite border issues with almost all its neighbours, India is expanding scope of relations among South Asia states (sans Pakistan). Under this approach, New Delhi is attempting to strengthen its regional clout against China by relying on BIMSTEC, an already fractured association due to disagreements on subjects such as territorial boundary and migration.

BIMSTEC has evidently become India's preferred platform for regional cooperation. This is why, New Delhi has been trying to stymie the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC)⁹ since 2016 by boycotting SAARC's Summit in Pakistan. However, it is important to note that India would be unable to unite BIMSTEC into a geopolitical force to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Likewise, India this year became the Vice Chair¹¹ of IORA and warned its member states of 'hidden agendas' in unviable projects and unsustainable debt¹² hinting towards Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) by China. Whereas the Chair of IORA, Sri Lanka, at the IORA flagship event 'Ocean Nations: The 3rd Annual Indo-Pacific Islands Dialogue' was wary of antagonising China and dismissed concerns of 'spy ships' docking on Sri Lankan ports to state that 'research vessels' docking at the Sri Lankan port is a matter of routine.¹³ This speculates that IORA under the Sri Lankan chairmanship would attempt to maintain balance in geopolitical competition in the 'Indo-Pacific' and would avoid being dictated by India, reducing India's grip over IORA.

⁷ BIMSTEC members: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

⁸ IORA Members: Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

⁹ SAARC members: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri-Lanka

¹⁰ Tobias Scholz, "BIMSTEC: India's Unlikely Security Platform in The Bay Of Bengal," *9Dashline*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/bimstec-indias-unlikely-regional-security-platform-in-the-bay-of-bengal>

¹¹ Suhasini Haider, "How is the Indian Ocean Rim Association a key bloc for India?," *The Hindu*, October 15, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-is-the-indian-ocean-rim-association-a-key-bloc-for-india-explained/article67421544.ece>

¹² <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-warns-of-dangers-of-hidden-agendas-in-unviable-projects-or-unsustainable-debt/articleshow/104344213.cms?from=mdr>

¹³ Rajni Gamage, "Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy During Crisis Recovery," *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/sri-lankas-foreign-policy-during-crisis-recovery/>

Maldivian Elections and 'India First' Policy

Recent Elections in the Maldives have also presented a gloomy picture for India, as they ended India's fame in Male when new Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu asked for the withdrawal of Indian soldiers from his country.¹⁴ President Muizzu won the elections based on his campaign of 'India Out' and to end Maldives' 'India first' policy. Though an organized exit of the Indian military is expected, the call to evacuate the Indian defence personnel from Maldives comes as a blow to India's ambition to expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean to counter China. Chinese analysts saw this move as a brave step forward for sovereign and independent Maldives.¹⁵ They believe that this would permit the stalled airport construction in Male, which was a major hurdle to the Maldives tourism-driven economy. It is noteworthy that the first official visit by the Maldivian President was to Turkiye rather than India, which shows a departure from the usual trend.¹⁶ It seems the Maldivian President has taken a clear stance against India, which is detrimental to Indian strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region.

Conclusion

Recent developments in the Indian Ocean Region indicate that India is making some noticeable effort to stall the growing Chinese influence in the region. It has been fortifying a naval base on the Eastern end of the Indian Ocean as well as questioning the possibility of blockade of the Malacca Strait on the Western end of the Indian Ocean. These regions are actively used by China for more than 80 per cent of its maritime trade. India has also been galvanizing support at regional multilateral forums such as BIMSTEC and IORA to prove itself as an alternative option to China. However, India still faces hurdles in garnering effective support from regional governments as they are more favourable to China than India. This comes as a challenge for New Delhi, which it would need to manoeuvre in order to ensure a tangible influence over the region.

The recently elected Maldivian President altered the country's 'India first' policy to 'India out' by demanding New Delhi to withdraw its troops from Maldives, which could have a domino effect in the region. This development indicates that though India has been craving for influence in the Indian Ocean, it has weak control or influence vis-à-vis the regional governments and their territory. Hence,

¹⁴ "Maldives new president asks India to withdraw its military," *Reuters*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/maldives-new-president-asks-india-withdraw-its-military-2023-11-19/>

¹⁵ "Maldives asks India to withdraw military, expected to 'facilitate more independent and equal diplomacy,'" *Global Times*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1302109.shtml>

¹⁶ Sandeep Dikshit, "Maldives Prez picks Turkey over India for his first official visit," *The Tribune India*, November 27, 2023, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/maldives-prez-picks-turkey-over-india-for-his-first-official-visit-566311>

it is safer to claim that India's capacity to act as a force in the Indian Ocean is still limited, and it may not be in a position to exercise strategic influence beyond its geographical proximity.