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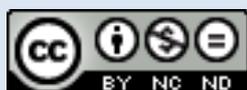
## Modi 3.0 and the Island States of the Indian Ocean

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Of the seven Heads of State invited to PM Modi's third swearing-in ceremony from India's neighbourhood, four were from the island states of the Indian Ocean, namely Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles.<sup>1</sup> Apart from sending signals about expanding the arc of India's neighbourhood circle, it also sent a message about the growing relevance of the maritime sphere for India. Additionally, it conveys to global policymakers and commentators that with New Delhi emerging as the link between the Global North and South, it is well set and ready to manage and engage with both its continental and maritime neighbours. However, apart from India's resource constraints that impinge on its role in the Indian Ocean, China's diplomatic, institutional, economic, military, and strategic role will increasingly measure and monitor India's effectiveness and impact in the region.

When standing at the centre of the Indian Ocean, one can see a semi-circular arc encompassing the Eastern Coast of Africa, parts of West Asia, Southern Asia, some parts of Southeast Asia, and Western Australia. The large maritime space between these continental boundaries includes the island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Seychelles, and Mauritius in the Western Indian Ocean, lying in the close vicinity of the Mozambique Channel, the maritime highway that has large investments in the field of natural gas of various regional and extra-regional players. It also includes the French overseas territory of La Reunion and Mayotte. Maldives and Sri Lanka lie in the Central Indian Ocean area, an area rich in sea bed resources like polymetallic nodules, along with the Indian territory of Lakshadweep. The Eastern Indian Ocean includes the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which hosts the only tri-service command of the country, as well as the Cocos (keeling) and Christmas islands of Australia near the Malacca Strait, a choke point that links the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

The spotlight on the islands was underscored with the launching of Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) in 2015 under Modi 1.0 and later hosting the G-20 ambassadors when New Delhi commenced its presidency under Modi 2.0 at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.<sup>2</sup> In between period was marked by some high-level bilateral visits and initiatives from both sides like the Indian President visiting Madagascar for the first time, India and Australia cooperating on their respective island territories for joint patrolling in the eastern Indian Ocean, the launching of the trilateral agreement between India, Australia and France to promote maritime security and safety, and others. Though in the past two tenures of the Modi government, the island diplomacy of India did make a move but a consistent momentum was missing. By maximising the presence of the island countries

at the beginning of Modi 3.0, the strategic signalling is clear that with evolving times and changing dynamics, India's focus is both on territorial issues and maritime convergences.

For a considerable length of time, the friction in India-China relations has been zeroed down to the boundary issue in its North and North-east. However, in recent times, Chinese activities, such as ingresses made by its research vessels and warships in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), have caught attention. Although, this is largely a military dimension that is used to look at China in the Indian Ocean. Historically, China's presence in the island countries of the Indian Ocean dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when many Chinese were taken as labourers to work on the plantation fields for colonial masters. The old Chinese have integrated and assimilated themselves with the local society by adopting their culture, contributing to their politics, and shaping their economy. However, the Chinese who made inroads post-Cultural Revolution and the reform period due to economic opportunities on the island look at the islands only for economic and strategic benefits. The larger objective of these *New Chinese* people is to enhance trade with the island countries, purely guided by profit and benefits, unlike the *old Chinese*, for whom social and political life also mattered.<sup>3</sup> Another underpinning associated with the *New Chinese* is the focus given by the government in Beijing on *One China* principle, and cultivating support for its initiatives like the Global Civilisation Initiative, Global Development Initiative, and Global Security Initiative, the three Chinese initiatives to shape and make the world in the Chinese manner. Its reflection has been most evident in the various joint statements and political outcomes of the several high-level visits conducted by Beijing to the island countries of the IOR, and vice-versa.

While China is a distant country in the Indian Ocean, India is a residential player and has cultivated ties across the spectrum with the island countries from historical to institutional. New Delhi has been the foundational developmental partner of the island countries since their independence. Further, India has always provided unwavering support to political stability and worked towards strengthening the pillar of democracy in these countries. To this end, the guest list at the swearing-in ceremony only testified to India's commitment. However, the road ahead is not an easy one for India, considering Beijing's increasing influence across the spectrum. By underscoring the importance of island nations in its developmental journey, Modi 3.0 has taken the appropriate initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's Office, "Visit of leaders for the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister and Council of Ministers", Press Information Bureau, June 08, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=2023566>. Accessed on June 20, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Suhasini Haidar, "Government takes G20 diplomats to Andaman for preview briefing", *The Hindu*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-takes-g20-diplomats-to-andamans-resort-for-preview-briefing/article66188132.ece>. Accessed on June 25, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Mathieu Pellerin, "The Recent Blossoming in Relations Between China and Madagascar", French Institute of International Relations, February 2012, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/noteafriquempellerinb.pdf>. Accessed on June 01, 2024.

