

REUNION AND COCOS ISLANDS: THE BOOKENDS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Unlike the other sovereign island countries of the Indian Ocean, La Reunion and Cocos (Keeling) Islands are the overseas or extended territories of France and Australia respectively. Apart from the fact that both are dependencies of great powers which lends their respective countries a sizeable Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Indian Ocean, their location at the two extremes i.e., in the Eastern and Western Indian Ocean adds to their strategic significance for the larger region. Their geographical location astride key choke points (La Reunion near the Mozambique Channel and Cocos Keeling near the Malacca Strait) adds another layer to the evolving security dynamics of the region (see Fig 1) This also makes both Australia and France prominent residential players in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), along with India, which is centrally located, with its own island countries of Lakshadweep, and Andaman, and Nicobar, on its western and eastern seaboard respectively. Against this backdrop, the paper will make a modest attempt to unfold the significance of these small yet strategically located islands in the vast Indian Ocean, and further throw light on how these three countries (India, France

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and Australia) can collectively use their synergy in dealing with several military and non-military challenges in the Indian Ocean.

Fig 1: Geography of the Indian Ocean



Source: <https://indian-ocean-map.carnegieendowment.org/?page=Geography-of-the-Indian-Ocean&views=Island-Territories>. Accessed on February 20, 2025.

GEOPOLITICAL, GEOECONOMIC, AND GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

Unlike the other oceans, the Indian Ocean is the only ocean in the world that is landlocked on three sides by three different continents, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. This vast maritime geography is significantly dominated by several scattered island countries in all its eastern, western, and central parts: Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles, La Reunion, and Mayotte in the Western Indian Ocean, along with Lakshadweep Islands of India, and Maldives, and Sri Lanka in the Central Indian Ocean, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Cocos (Keeling) in the Eastern Indian Ocean, also known as the Bay of Bengal. What further zooms out the significance of these island countries is their location astride the chokepoints, which are like entry and exit gates for the transportation of billions of

dollars of trade and technology. As per the U.S. Energy Information Administration, four out of the eight important chokepoints in terms of both volume and strategic significance are located in the Indian Ocean.¹ Out of these four, three (Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Mozambique Channel) lie in the Western Indian Ocean,² the region that is superimposed by increasing political instability and whose ripple effects are often seen on the security and economic dynamics of the region. This includes the recent Red Sea imbroglio due to the Israel-Hamas war, and consequential Houthi attacks on global shipping that once again brought in several regional and extra-regional players to secure the trade to and from the region.

The region is also well known for various non-traditional challenges like drug smuggling as it is nestled between the world's two infamous drug routes—the Golden Triangle on the east and the Golden Crescent on the west. Particularly vulnerable is the Bay of Bengal (BoB) region where, instead of the interior land routes, the sea routes are being preferred. Additionally, the BoB region is at the crossroads of other significant challenges that emerge from a large number of homeless and stateless Rohingya refugees, the Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing³ due to its vast continental shelf, and the vulnerable impact of climate change.

Goeconomically, the region is further important due to the presence of polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulfides, and cobalt-rich crusts, all of which are quintessential for the manufacturing of the upcoming green technologies globally and otherwise. As the resources on the land become increasingly scarce and limited, the oceans will likely emerge as potential grounds of competition, contestation, and, sometimes, cooperation. To this end, certain areas

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1. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "World Oil Transit Chokepoints", June 25, 2024, https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints. Accessed on February 11, 2025.
 2. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Three Important Oil Trade Chokepoints are Located Around the Arabian Peninsula", August 4, 2017, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=32352>. Accessed on February 11, 2025.
 3. Anthony Bergin, "Bringing the Indian and Pacific Oceans Together on IUU Fishing", December 14, 2021, [https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bringing-the-indian-and-pacific-oceans-together-on-iuu-fishing#:~:text=The%20Bay%20of%20Bengal%20is,IOTC\)%20conservation%20and%20management%20measures](https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bringing-the-indian-and-pacific-oceans-together-on-iuu-fishing#:~:text=The%20Bay%20of%20Bengal%20is,IOTC)%20conservation%20and%20management%20measures.). Accessed on February 12, 2025.

have already been allotted by the International Seabed Authority which will drive several convergences and divergences among the regional and extra-regional players. All this requires that the region is continuously scanned and monitored to keep it free from outside influences and other emerging threats.

BONHOMIE BETWEEN INDIA AND FRANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

La Reunion Island is a French overseas territory and a European Union (EU) member. Thereby, it has received a considerable amount of resources for the development of a university, a viable commercial port, and connectivity through roads and bridges. It also serves as the biggest overseas base of France, which makes Paris an important player of the IOR. La Reunion is another perfect example of the blend of European, African, and Indian cultures.

According to the Consulate General of India in La Reunion, the earliest Indian settlers included a few women from Goa who were taken to marry the French settlers around 1669.⁴ Later, slaves and indentured labourers, mainly from Puducherry and Tamil Nadu, found their way to the island. Around 1850, many Gujarati Muslims and Hindus went voluntarily to trade in jewellery and food. While many of them were forced to change their religion to Christianity, some of them retained Hinduism. However, over time, the line between the two religions has blurred as successive generations have picked up a unique identity of being islanders while also bringing the Indianess into their daily cuisine and attire.⁵ According to a celebrity chef on the island, more than 80 per cent of the dishes are inspired by India, including samosas which he almost considers a national dish, to *acchard* (pickle), *kurkuma* (turmeric), and chicken curry that

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4. Consulate General of India (Saint Dennis, La Reunion), "India and Reunion Island Bilateral", <https://www.cgireunion.gov.in/extra?id=eyJpdil6lJrZlgrYU0zckFXcjBvYWRnRTh5QWc9PSIsInZhbHVlIjoieUpMSVdQWVWcLlZaeitjMVwvcDVBTlhBPT0iLCJtYWMiOiI3ZDVhOGQzMWE2ZDIyM2EwNDU0OWQ1ZGFiYTRjNTYyMmZjNGFkZjM3MTEwY2JhNGVmYzY1NDM0MzhjZDM3MWJkIn0>. Accessed on January 5, 2024.
 5. Sudha Pillai, "3 Quirky Indian Tales from French Reunion Island", *The Telegraph Online*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/travel/3-quirky-indian-tales-from-french-reunion-island/cid/1674937>. Accessed on January 5, 2024.

occupy centre-stage on the dining tables.⁶ There are several other ways through which continuous attempts are made to preserve the Indian culture. This includes the celebration of Indian festivals like Deepawali, Eid, and Navratri, and the formation of more than 200 associations to promote Indian culture on the island.⁷ In Mauritius, the Indians have significant economic and political influence in the island country, which also has the distinction of having the largest concentration of Indians abroad.⁸ To further build up on the diasporic ties, both India and France have been actively looking to collaborate since the middle of the last decade. This includes the first-ever visit by the minister of culture, tourism, and civil aviation to inaugurate an Indian Cultural Centre in 2015, and the visit by several Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) during the Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas.

Apart from leveraging the social and cultural bonds, India and France are also increasingly realising the economic and strategic potential of the location of La Reunion in the Western Indian Ocean. This is evident from the words of French President Emmanuel Macron, who stated that all the economically active players are well aware of the emergence of the Indian Ocean as a strategic space of the future. France, in this context, has an unparalleled role to play due to the passage of global trade, quintessential submarine communication cables, enormous amounts of fish stocks, and a treasure trove of biodiversity.⁹

To underscore the strategic importance, both India and France signed a military logistics agreement in 2018, which allows both to conduct joint surveillance and reconnaissance in the Western Indian Ocean. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has gained considerable significance, especially when the challenges from traditional and non-traditional sources are rising and the security architecture of the Indian Ocean is in a volatile state. Using the P-8I, the long-range maritime patrol aircraft to scan the wider region proves to be an

6. Ibid.

7. Ankita Bhattacharjee, "Indian Diaspora in Reunion Island: A Strategic Asset", *Strategic Analyses*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 402-412, 2018.

8. Ibid.

9. Ambassade De France En Inde, "Strong Indian Presence "Choose La Reunion" Summit", October 23, 2019, <https://in.ambafrance.org/Strong-Indian-Presence-at-the-Choose-La-Reunion-Summit>. Accessed on January 10, 2025.

advantage for both countries which want to deal with smuggling and the increasing cases of piracy in the Western Indian Ocean.

THROUGH THE EASTERN INDIAN OCEAN—COCOS (KEELING) ISLANDS

Australia's Navy fleet Commander Rear Admiral Jonathan Early has posited that at the time of the big power muscle movement, the role of India and Australia as the bookends of the Indian Ocean is quintessential.¹⁰ According to the latest maritime doctrine of India, the region extending from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of Australia is the primary area of responsibility of the Indian Navy. This, when superimposed with the primary area of responsibility of the Australian Navy, as mentioned in the latest *Defence Strategic Review 2023* and *2020 Australian Strategic Update*, the Eastern Indian Ocean, is of immense significance for both New Delhi and Canberra. Therefore, the Eastern Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal is the common area for both the residential players of the IOR.

Apart from challenges like piracy, climate change, irregular migration, and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU), the region is also witnessing a growing number of Chinese research vessels, submarines, and underwater drones. The Chinese vessels are known to collect information about resources, and data related to salinity, depth and turbidity, and oxygen and chlorophyll levels. The use of such data is not necessarily limited to civilian use but can also be used for tracking foreign submarines and the operation of their own submarines. The Chinese vessels are also suspected of tracking satellite and rocket launches.

These vessels are traversing alternative routes like the Lombok, Wetar and Sunda Straits, which lie close to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands of Australia. The location of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands is close to the Malacca Strait. This offers an excellent opportunity for both countries to use their island territories as platforms for wider

10. Dinaker Peri, "India, Australia are Guardians of the Flanks of the Indian Ocean: Australian Navy Officer", *The Hindu*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-australia-are-guardians-of-the-flanks-of-the-indian-ocean-australian-navy-officer/article66083029.ece>. Accessed on January 8, 2025.

collaboration. The islands that lie north and south to each other can be used by the surveillance aircraft to conduct MDA. This will act as a force multiplier to deal with the security situation, and also increase the interoperability between the forces that are already said to have undertaken a four-fold increase in their bilateral exercises.

A burden-sharing model would also help in addressing regional challenges, including disaster events resulting from climate change, IUU fishing, as well as search and rescue operations.¹¹ As the region is too large to be managed by a single country, a joint mechanism like this will enhance capability and also provide further opportunities to expand the cooperation. Further, the cooperation between New Delhi and Canberra will assist in driving the 'Indo' focus of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), where both are residents of the Indian Ocean.¹² Enhancing the QUAD's focus on the Indian Ocean will ensure a balanced approach to the region.

WAY AHEAD

Apart from the defence cooperation (including the recent deal on the Rafale marine fighters and Scorpene class submarines), which remains one of the pillars of the India-France partnership in the Indo-Pacific region, trilateral cooperation must be the way ahead, as discussed in President Macron's Republic Day visit to India in 2024.¹³ The bilateral interests of both nations to deal with the evolving security dynamics are feeding into each other's broader interests and taking the relationship forward. Paris needs New Delhi, which is centrally located in the IOR, with two island territories across its eastern and western seaboard, to deal with the emerging inter-state

11 Radhey Tambi, "Islands as Stepping Stones for India-Australia Collaboration", Lowy Institute, December 2, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/islands-stepping-stones-india-australia-collaboration>. Accessed on January 7, 2025.

12. Radhey Tambi, "To Balance the QUAD Equation, India and Australia Must Drive an 'Indo' Focus", Lowy Institute, June 27, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/balance-quad-equation-india-australia-must-drive-indo-focus>. Accessed on January 5, 2025.

13. Ministry of External Affairs, "India-France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25-26 January 2024)," January 26, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India_France_Joint_Statement_on_the_State_Visit_of_HE_Mr_Emmanuel_Macron_President_of_French_Republic_to_India_25_26_January_2024. Accessed on January 27, 2024.

competition and non-traditional challenges. Similarly, India needs France, which not only has the overseas territory of Mayotte and La Reunion Islands in the Western Indian Ocean, but also has a strong Francophone influence in the Vanilla group of islands and the eastern coast of Africa, all of which would allow New Delhi to expand its reach in its backyard further. The emphasis on the extension of the joint surveillance mission, currently operating in the Southwest Indian Ocean, to India's neighbourhood¹⁴ to secure the entry and exit points of the Indian Ocean speaks about the intention of taking the cooperation further to the south and southeast of India in the Bay of Bengal region.

In this context, the revival of India-France-Australia trilateral relations as posited by the French president in the joint statement¹⁵ will act as a stepping stone in enhancing the security of the IOR. To this end, a cooperative mechanism by using the island territory of La Reunion (France) in the Western Indian Ocean, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the east, and Cocos (Keeling) of Australia near its western coast will ensure robust surveillance and reconnaissance covering the entire stretch of the IOR. India is already deploying its P-8I on the French territory in the Western Indian Ocean, and the intention of taking such bilateral cooperation further with like-minded partners like Australia is reflected in the talks that are underway for strategically using the Cocos (Keeling) for joint surveillance. But the need of the hour is that this bilateral cooperation must now be transformed into a trilateral one which will not only enhance interoperability among the militaries of the three countries but also assist in effectively and economically dealing with non-traditional challenges like piracy, drug trafficking, and smuggling, and IUU fishing which is a concern for all in the region. To this end, cooperation among the three nations can also be extended to include niche areas like hydrographic surveys, anti-submarine warfare, and anti-drone warfare.

Keeping an eagle eye over the vital trade routes is immensely significant for all democracies. India and France have already reached a comfortable juncture by conducting bilateral surveillance

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

exercises. The work to expand the runway of the Cocos (Keeling) is already underway to accommodate large military aircraft such as the Poseidon. The inaugural visit by the P-8A of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to Reunion took place in mid-2024. The time is ripe to convert these dyads of India-Australia, India-France, and France-Australia into a triad of India-France-Australia which will not only multiply the synergy among the forces but will also form a bedrock for a strong and stable security apparatus of the Indian Ocean. As all three democracies seek to revisit, reimagine and recalibrate their collective vision of a free and open Indian Ocean, their collaborative and cohesive surveillance and reconnaissance exercise will demonstrate the commitment of each of the three players to building and maintaining the security architecture of the Indian Ocean.¹⁶

16. Radhey Tambi, "Between Them, Australia, France and India Can Watch the Indian Ocean", *The Strategist*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/between-them-australia-france-and-india-can-watch-the-indian-ocean/>. Accessed on January 15, 2025.

