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Indian Presence in the Chagos Island, India-US Military Cooperation: A Dimension of India's MAHASAGAR Policy

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Introduction

Despite all the talk about India and the United States (US) falling out over tariffs and trade, the ongoing cooperation between the two nations, observed in Diego Garcia and the larger Chagos archipelago, stands out even more. From October 22 to 28, navies of India and the US conducted [joint training](#) in the Chagos area, focusing on anti-submarine warfare and maritime domain awareness, involving P-8 Poseidon aircraft. The drills served as a reminder that, despite the recent downswing in India-US ties, the partners are willing to collaborate on the broader, evolving security landscape in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, the narrow opening in Chagos is a 'goldilocks moment for India' to not only seek cooperation and build trust with like-minded partners and friends, but also a chance to redefine its role and responsibility under the revised and expanded vision of Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR).

Diego Garcia is a pivotal US military base, but its location in the contested Chagos archipelago had made it politically sensitive. This was recently resolved via a [deal](#) between the United Kingdom (UK) and Mauritius, which will see Port Louis regain control of the Chagos. At the same time, the US continues its presence on Diego Garcia.

India has been an ardent supporter of Mauritius' sovereignty over Chagos since the 1970s, and its backing of the recent agreement is a testament to that. Recently, on the eight-day visit of the Mauritian Prime Minister, Dr. Navinchandra Ramgoolam, to India, the latter has agreed to [develop](#) the marine protected area around Chagos. To further strengthen its presence in the area, where it is welcomed as a preferred security provider, India has also been allowed to conduct a hydrographic survey and [develop a satellite station](#) at Chagos to track and receive data. Information sharing and cooperation at sea have been the major highlights of recent engagement. It has brought the interests of New Delhi and Washington closer geographically, in a way that is unprecedented in their relations.

Involvement in the Chagos has also given India a chance to do some heavy lifting, including developing the infrastructure required to address emerging military and non-military challenges such as piracy, drug smuggling, maritime terrorism, and to swiftly conduct humanitarian and disaster relief operations in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, it will allow India to increase its reach and presence in the Central Indian Ocean, where the bulk of maritime traffic passes, and further assist in monitoring the surrounding area by conducting underwater surveillance through sensors and drones. As India becomes a [pioneer investor](#) in deep-sea research and exploration, and the only country in the world with two polymetallic sulphides (PMS) exploration contracts with the International Seabed Authority,

one in the Central Indian and the Southwest Indian Ridge and the other in the Carlsberg Ridge, its physical presence will add to its resource utilisation in the times to come.

While the deal regarding the return of sovereignty of Chagos to Mauritius from the UK is awaiting ratification, trepidation about the future of the soaring Chinese presence is already colouring policymakers' minds in the West. "Mauritius is a close ally of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and if Diego Garcia is lost, Chinese power projection will reach the heart of the Indian Ocean," as [warned](#) by the former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Another [defence expert](#) observed, "A British default would hand China a propaganda victory, give Mauritius justification to expel the United States and the United Kingdom from the islands, and could unravel the entire security architecture of the Indian Ocean. It would be the single greatest strategic blunder of the century."

Although Chinese diplomatic and economic presence has seen a consistent climb in the Indian Ocean since the beginning of the century, and in particular after the launch of its Belt and Road initiative (BRI), it is now making headway in the security architecture by increasing its institutional and military footprint across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). To this end, a stable and secure presence in the vast geography of the IOR will give Beijing and its military the reach it currently lacks.

As the dynamics of the Indian Ocean become more fluid and volatile, it is in India's interest to capitalise on every opportunity to sustain its presence while maintaining peace and stability in this region of interest.