

India and France in the Vanilla Islands

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Summary

In inviting India to a recent conference with the leaders of island nations in the South West Indian Ocean, French President Emmanuel Macron has elevated the ambitions for strategic maritime cooperation between Paris and Delhi. The long neglected synergies between India and France may now help both nations to secure their own interests as well as promote public goods in a very important sub-region of the Indian Ocean.

India's intensifying political engagement with the South Western Indian Ocean under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron's strong interest in a regional security partnership with Delhi have rapidly raised the prospects for potentially consequential strategic coordination in the so-called Vanilla islands.

A group of exotic island states in the South Western Indian Ocean – Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Reunion and Seychelles – joined hands a few years ago to promote tourism to their corner in the Indian Ocean. That many of them grow vanilla – which gives us the popular ice cream flavour – was a good enough reason for calling themselves after it.

The strategic significance of these islands goes well beyond their production of vanilla. The islands sit astride vital sea lines of communication linking Africa and the Southern oceans with the Middle East, the Subcontinent and East Asia. As the European expansion into the Indian Ocean began in the late 15th century, these islands became objects of contestation among the then great powers.

With all the sea lines of communication between Europe and the Indian Ocean coming round Africa and going through the Mozambique channel, the Vanilla islands became attractive way stations for both replenishment and power projection.

France gained upper hand among the European powers in the Vanilla Islands in the 18th century. After the great power settlement at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century, left the French influence in tact in the Vanilla islands.

The construction of the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean and the Red Sea in the mid 19th century obviated the need for European shipping to go around Africa. Today as African resources become important for Asian powers like China, Japan and India, the SLOCs from Africa's east coast and the Vanilla islands that straddle them have once again become important.

Yet, the idea of India-France cooperation in the Indian Ocean seems somewhat counter-intuitive. Although India's relations with France have been on the upswing for nearly two

decades, the focus until recently was on such bilateral issues as nuclear and defence cooperation and on global issues like climate change.

However, regional maritime security cooperation, especially in the Indian Ocean, seemed a remote possibility. For the conservatives in Delhi's foreign policy establishment, France, like the United States (US), is a rather unlikely partner in the Indian Ocean. Through the Cold War, India was largely hostile to the Western presence in the Indian Ocean, thanks to the emphasis on non-alignment.

After the Cold War, India tentatively embarked in expanded engagement with the Western powers in the Indian Ocean but was hesitant to take it beyond joint exercises. During its decade long rule (2004-14), the United Progressive Alliance government, led by Manmohan Singh, balked at more functional security cooperation with the Western powers. That began to change under the National Democratic Alliance government, led by Modi.

In one of his first foreign policy initiatives in early 2015, Modi unveiled an Indian Ocean policy, known as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) during his visit to Mauritius and Seychelles. Besides offering to step up bilateral economic and security engagement with key littoral states and strengthen regional multilateralism, Modi promised to work with [other powers](#) in the Indian Ocean.

This was a big departure from the traditional framework of Indian foreign policy that consciously shunned collaboration with 'extra-regional powers'. In fact, the demand that the Western powers vacate their military forces from the Indian Ocean was very much part of India's declaratory policy.

As part of the new sense of self-confidence and pragmatism, the Modi government signed the long pending agreement with the US in 2016 called the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement that opened access to each other's military facilities. Interoperability with the US was now a formal part of the Indian strategy.

Having crossed a major political hurdle with the US, India moved quickly to conclude a similar agreement with France during Macron's visit to India in March 2018. Even more important, the two leaders unveiled a ['Joint Strategic Vision'](#) for maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

Meeting again in the summer of 2019, the two leaders declared that "maritime security cooperation between France and India is a domain of excellence in their strategic partnership" and "welcomed the swift implementation" of the decisions identified in the joint vision in 2018. Macron raised the bar again by inviting the Indian leadership to join him at a conference of the Vanilla island leaders in the island of Reunion in October 2019. That no other country was invited underlined the importance Macron attached to cooperation with India in the South Western Indian Ocean.

Besides inviting Indian businesses to join in the development of the Vanilla islands, Macron proposed a [three-pronged agenda](#) for cooperation between Delhi and Paris – maritime domain awareness, securing the fragile maritime environment of the island states and the prevention of hegemonic intrusions into the littoral.

Two years ago, the idea that India and France could [work together](#) in the Indian Ocean was at best an interesting one. Today, it promises to emerge as a critical pillar of regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean, especially in the Vanilla islands.

Although India has close ties with Mauritius, it viewed the island nation as the host to a significant diaspora. It is only in recent years that Delhi has taken a strategic perspective of Mauritius and Seychelles. It has also begun to devote some attention to long ignored Madagascar and Comoros. Even more important Delhi is finally seeing the Vanilla Islands as a coherent strategic space.

In offering a regional partnership with India, France is breaking from its long-standing tradition of treating the Vanilla Islands as its exclusive sphere of influence. In the past, India had seen itself as a 'lone ranger' in the Indian Ocean. Today, Delhi's maritime partnership with Paris reflects India's growing need to build productive coalitions with like-minded powers in the Indian Ocean.

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