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Indian Maritime Diplomacy in the African Maritime Domain

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Introduction

India is a pivotal player in its region: a large state and a relatively stable one at that, enjoying an important geostrategic location, which, alongside its extensive coastline, offers the opportunity for power projection eastwards towards Southeast Asia and westwards towards the Middle East and the East African littoral. Indeed, as it faces up against its foremost adversary, China and Chinese-allied neighbours such as Pakistan, its ability to build partnerships within the reaches of the ocean which shares its name represents an opportunity to shore up power and influence, forming its own 'string of pearls' to counter that of China. As a result, the Indian Ocean has had a historic importance both from a foreign policy point of view and as in terms of naval strategy for India, but one that has grown in contemporary times. India has long-standing historic relations with many African small island states in the Indian Ocean, as well as with states on Africa's east coast. Increasingly, India is also looking beyond regional proximity in expanding its sphere of influence, extending its hand to states on Africa's Atlantic coast. India's relationship to these states is interesting: in some cases, its dominance in the relationship is quite clear, to the extent that it is directly involved in matters relating to said state's national security, whereas in other cases its maritime diplomacy is narrower and serves a smaller, more specific set of interests. This chapter examines Indian maritime diplomacy in the African maritime domain by first considering India's rise and placement in global politics, before tracing the development of its seaward strategic thinking since the time of its independence. It then moves to a discussion of India's historical links with Africa and subsequently details Indian maritime diplomacy in the Western Indian Ocean, East and West Africa before concluding.

A Brief Note on India's Rise

To contextualise India's maritime aspirations and how these intersect with its diplomatic efforts, it is prudent to first consider India's place in the world

and its emergence not only as a pivotal power within its region, but also as an increasingly important global player. Indeed, India is a pivotal political actor at a number of international fora, such as being a member of the BRICS grouping of emerging economies, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, while also being a member of the G20, an intergovernmental platform that includes 19 state members and the European Union, involving important industrialised and developing countries. At these fora, India has been able to advance its strategic priorities in a changing global landscape where it conceives of its prospects of success in achieving its national interest as being tied to connection with the rest of the world rather than isolation from it.[1] Economically, India is also a significant player, accounting for 7.04 per cent of global gross domestic product (adjusted for purchasing power parity) in 2021, making it one of the largest economies in the world, and is projected to be the second largest economy by 2050.[2]

Wulf notes that the "shift in global political interests and economic power towards Asia after the termination of the East-West antagonism and the decline of the previous dominance of the United States" has positioned India to take up a larger role on the world stage. This re-balancing has tallied with India's own desire for a leadership role, tied to notions of destined greatness that transcends regional politics and catapults it onto the world stage. India's economic growth has only compounded these political aspirations and has allowed the country to position itself as a key player in a number of important global issues. Moreover, "given India's status and long-term record as a stable, secular society and multicultural democracy, the Indian political elite envisions its rank in global affairs in the top echelon."[3] This, Dahiya notes, alongside countries of the developed world growing increasingly averse to committing resources for the purposes of global peace and security, leaves a vacuum that India demonstrates some willingness towards filling.[4] What's more, assuming a position of greater leadership on the world stage serves the purpose of also countering China's growing power, especially in India's own backyard, where these actors "rub up against each other in the periphery that they share."[5]

Wulf's assessment, however, is that India's regional relations remain embryonic, noting a new and small development aid programme, and "unsteady and sporadic diplomatic efforts and political actions," which, he says, points to a reluctance in practice as a regional leader.[6] In the years since Wulf's writing, others, such as Menon, have opined that India's power, and its willingness and ability to use it, will "follow … India's success in building a strong, prosperous, and modern India." It is thus best served to utilise its rise to achieve this goal, alongside "sufficient security."[7]

Now, whether India's leadership aspirations are as yet fulfilled in practice is moot in the sense that it is this aspiration, and the conditions that inform it, that in turn impact upon its strategic thinking. As India develops and its interests expand, so must its strategy.[8]

India's Strategic Thinking

Menon argues that despite India's geography being open on several sides and offering access to both the Indian Ocean and the Middle East on one side, and the Andaman Sea and Southeast Asia on the other, its imperial legacy left it sea-blind. The maritime domain and Royal Navy remained controlled from London, whereas the land borders were within the mandate of the British government of India in Calcutta, leaving an inheritance of a local government which had predominantly landward-facing policies.[9]

Brewster notes that the influence of imperial Britain can still be seen in much of India's naval strategic thinking and approach to security. "Britain saw close links between India's external and internal security" and this continues to be a factor in present-day approaches to security.[10] What's more, having achieved independence, influential Indian geostrategist and statesman Kavalam Madhava Panikkar indicated that seafaring was a central element in the colonisation project and that as such felt strongly that the Indian Ocean should "remain truly Indian" and that this should be achieved by establishing "a system of forward bases at or near the Indian Ocean chokepoints, including … Mauritius and Socotra (near Aden)." As an independent state, India moved from Nehruvian strategic doctrine (as advanced by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and which hinged on nonalignment) to a more realist approach but one that still accepted Nehruvian ideals. "Nehruvian strategic principles were an intellectual anchor to Indian strategic thinking and dominated Indian strategic rhetoric up to the end of the Cold War. It continues to be influential today."[11] Nonalignment was indeed India's principal approach during the Cold War and drove the campaign for an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZOP), which was intended to prevent the arrival of external naval forces and which would, in turn, allow the Indian Navy to fill the vacuum and consolidate its regional leadership.[12]

Following the end of the Cold War, India needed to change tack and review its strategic goals. This involved re-establishing partnerships with world powers. Its position in a post-Cold War world (and indeed how it perceived of itself) was influenced by formally becoming a nuclear power in 1998 after having pursued a nuclear programme since the 1940s.[13] This, along with the "emotional currency" that nonalignment still holds, links to India's quest for 'strategic autonomy' – India's take on 'manifest destiny' and achieving its fated position as a great power. Brewster calls this a "patriotic touchstone" for India.[14] To draw further on an American foreign policy lexicon, for Indian strategic thinkers 'strategic autonomy' is its own Monroe Doctrine: a belief that it has a responsibility to act as a custodian of regional security and thus allowing it to conceive of itself as a net security provider. Indeed, Menon argues that the quest for strategic autonomy is a common thread running through successive administration policies for foreign affairs and security.[15]

Brewster points to the inherent inconsistency that strategic autonomy and security provision have with nonalignment, but notes that it remains a central goal for Indian strategic thinkers. While not necessarily being nonaligned, India is nonetheless anti-interventionist but happy to provide assistance in internal and external conflicts in the sub-region when requested to do so.[16] Indeed, Pattanaik explains that India defines defence cooperation as a tool to strengthen bilateral relations – a loose interpretation not linked to ideology, but rather aimed at buttressing influence.[17] What's more, the perception of India as a "benign security provider" makes the ground for it to establish its influence even more fertile.[18] Menon sees strategic autonomy as being Nehru's nonalignment by another name: "in practice it has meant keeping decision-making power with itself, avoiding alliances, and building India's capabilities while working with others when it was in India's interest to do so."[19]

These strategic principles have held implications for the country's approach to the sea and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in particular. This can be seen in Indian naval and maritime strategy. "India's standing as the most populous state in the Indian Ocean region and its central position in the northern Indian Ocean have long contributed to beliefs about the country's destiny to control its eponymous ocean."[20] To this end, India made a first attempt at a strategic thinking exercise for its maritime domain in the late 1980s, resulting in a *Maritime Strategy for India*, followed by the *Indian Maritime Doctrine* of 2004, which was revised in 2009. In 2007, India released a maritime–military strategy, known as *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, which was replaced in 2015 with a document entitled *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, now being the most current version of India's maritime strategic thinking.[21]

The 2015 iteration describes a 'primary area' and a 'secondary area' of interest: the first draws a line from the tip of the Cape of Good Hope to the outer edges of the archipelagic Southeast Asian states, while the second broadly includes Africa's western maritime domain, reaching down towards Antarctica, and extending up along the Western Pacific Ocean to include Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Ocean islands to reach the outer western limit of the European landmass and the maritime domain that extends from there. This provides a clear geostrategic view of where India prioritises its maritime diplomatic endeavours.[22] A second important aspect elaborated in the strategy document is India self-conceptualising as a net security provider: an overt undertaking to play an active role in the provision of regional maritime security, which has been previously explained by an erstwhile defence minister as a mandate that offers the possibility to be a "potent and stabilising force in the region."[23] Khurana explains that "India's role as a 'net maritime security provider' in the region is not only its normative responsibility as a regional power, but is also closely interwoven with the nation's own economic growth and prosperity."[24] It is a position that underscores the vision advanced by Modi of India supplying 'security and growth for all in the region.'

To address both the traditional and non-traditional threats expressed in the strategy (which is likewise a central aim of Indian foreign policy) – ranging from the threat posed by adversarial states to the likes of terrorism and unregulated economic activity – India's maritime strategy sets out to gain greater control of the sea space within its growing sphere of influence, to limit the prospects of adversaries gaining any naval foothold in this region, to protect sea lines of communication (SLOC), and finally to advance Indian strategic interests using maritime diplomacy.[25] Hughes summarises that the strategy seeks to modernise its navy to render a strong sea-going force – not only one that can offer defensive benefits in the form of securing trade routes and thus crucial energy supplies, but also one that can "project Indian influence beyond the immediate region."[26] Further, Rehman avers that the document demonstrates India's aspiration to greatness – a desire for greater prestige, greater autonomy, and greater resources.[27]

India's rivalry with China cannot be overlooked as a key factor in strategic considerations in general and maritime strategic thinking in particular. Chinese activity in the IOR has been a point of concern for India and its strategic objectives as a state. Hughes indicates that these concerns have been exacerbated over the last two decades, and draws on Garver's assessment that Chinese allyship with a number of non-allied neighbours is disquieting for India. These include its assistance to arch-rival Pakistan in the development of its military–industrial capability, defence relations with Nepal, a military and economic partnership with Myanmar, alongside growing ties with Bangladesh and normalising relations with Bhutan. Further, China's programme of power projection in the South China Sea, now spilling over into the IOR in the form of naval ship visits and the establishment of electronic monitoring facilities, is seen as both diminishing India's security and negatively affecting its own dominance in the IOR.[28] This assessment is echoed by Latham and Ullah and Hayat, and is seen as being something that is necessary to counter, bringing a balance of power, and allowing India to have a greater sense of mastery over security as a political good within its neighbourhood.[29]

What then does it mean for India to be a net security provider? Mukherjee explains that India's role as a net security provider encompasses four activities: first, capacity building; second, military diplomacy; third, military assistance; and finally, the deployment of military forces in response to a specific security situation.[30] This assessment sees security provision as solely military in nature. Pattanaik expands on this, not only noting Indian security provision to encompass more than just the military, but also including development aid and "its role as a stabiliser" in a neighbourhood struggling with various conflicts.[31]

Venter suggests that India's aspirations often surpass what it is reasonably capable of achieving.[32] Indeed, Pattanaik notes that challenges to India's role as conceived through the strategic lens of security provision are manifold and is of the view that its role is constrained by traditional security threats.[33] Be that as it may, this set of geographical, political, and strategic considerations

are what have shaped and influenced Indian engagement with African Indian Ocean island states and the African continent more broadly.

Historic Links with Africa and Strategic Motivations

After centuries of a more land-based, sea-blind foreign affairs outlook, India has in the last two decades started to turn its attention outward. Indeed, India's seaward orientation is, argues Venter, explained by its desire for geographical expansion and bid for greater significance on the world stage, which, he says, can only take place at sea.[34] For India, there are a number of aspects that make expansion towards Africa sensible. Of course, to its east it meets with the archipelagic states of Southeast Asia, a domain in which China already plays. To its west, it finds states located in its eponymous ocean with which it has family bonds. To be sure, India's historic ties in the Indian Ocean are familial, almost umbilical, in nature: both Mauritius and the Seychelles have sizable Indian diaspora communities. Around 68 per cent of Mauritians have Indian heritage, while in the Seychelles this figure stands at 11 per cent alongside a number of contract workers from India. Likewise, in the Maldives, Indians form a large expatriate community. This lends the countries linguistic and cultural links, while also bringing the island states into a natural sphere of influence for India and effecting a degree of soft power.[35]

In emphasising India's quest to counter China for dominance of the Western Indian Ocean, scholars of Indian naval strategy often incorrectly quote Alfred Thayer Mahan claiming that "whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia."[36] Certainly the plentiful navigational choke points in Southeast Asia, coupled with the large distance across the Pacific Ocean towards the Americas, present geostrategic challenges, leaving the Indian Ocean as a clear access point to the Middle Eastern, African, and European markets. Potgieter notes that 30 per cent of global trade is handled by ports on the Indian Ocean while "half of the world's container traffic traverses" this ocean, thus offering crucial SLOCs.[37] As noted by Karmwar, "the increased presence of the big powers in the Indian Ocean, have tended to prove that in view of the central geographical position, the network of vital trade routes will play an important strategic role in the future of Indo-African relationship."[38]

Karmwar traces India's relations with East Africa back thousands of years, disrupted by colonisation, but then revived as India and countries in Africa gained their independence.[39] An example of this can be found in the relationship that India shares with South Africa, given the number of Indians who were taken there as slaves in the 17th century, and then as indentured labourers in the 1800s. This bred a shared anti-colonial sentiment, and support from India for the anti-apartheid movement, and later similar socio-political conditions.[40] A famous element of this was Mahatma Gandhi's time spent in South Africa.[41]

While these links to the African continent are long-standing, India's historical engagement in Africa, and indeed the African maritime domain, can

be seen most clearly in the Indian Ocean islands. It is no surprise then that these relations continue to dominate India's diplomatic efforts in the IOR and Africa.

Indian Maritime Diplomacy in Africa

Before delving into Indian maritime diplomacy, it is helpful to briefly pause to offer a conceptual clarification and set out what is meant by this term. In brief, maritime diplomacy transcends narrower definitions that have been employed in reference to the maritime domain, including naval diplomacy and gunboat diplomacy which are both necessarily more military in nature. Likewise, other concepts such as 'Blue diplomacy' have been floated and are reasonably amorphous, harking to notions such as the Blue Economy. To be clear, maritime diplomacy is a more encompassing term that brings into the fold the above-mentioned types of diplomatic practice, but including other dimensions beyond security and economics to also include development and soft power, for example. Van Nieuwkerk and Manganyi explain that maritime diplomacy is "the behaviour of a nation in pursuit of its maritime interests, usually by combining and/or applying the instruments of state power."[42]

The Indian Ocean Islands

Mishra notes that India's approach to maritime security in Africa have included four key avenues of cooperation: 1) training of navy, defence, and other personnel at Indian educational facilities such as the Indian Naval Academy; 2) assisting with hydrographic surveys and capacity development in this area; 3) contributing to anti-piracy activities in the form of patrols and mission-based deployment of naval assets; and 4) port visits and the development of monitoring stations to aid interoperability and foster synergy.[43] This certainly provides an accurate summary for its engagement with the Indian Ocean island nations and demonstrates an expression of net security provision.

Contemporary India's relationship with Mauritius dates to 1974. It draws on cultural ties and consolidates this with economic and defence cooperation, with agreements in both areas, alongside a maritime security agreement, which came with a US$500 million line of credit. Mauritius further receives both military equipment and training from India, while the Indian Navy conducts patrols in its Exclusive Economic Zone. India also deploys a national security advisor to the country's prime minister and provides the commander of the country's coast guard.[44] These appointments are reasonably unusual, as both positions pertain directly to national security, which most states would naturally seek to keep entirely domestic. Further, India has extended its support on the contentious issue of the Diego Garcia island where foreign forces have established bases.[45] India offered support in 2017 for the involvement of the International Court of Justice by way of the provision of an advisory opinion

and, on the basis of this advice, in 2019 supporting the immediate departure of British forces from the islands.[46]

Next, the Seychelles: the strategic importance of the Seychelles for India was underscored by the island nation being one of the first countries visited by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, as India looks to this state as a target recipient of expanded maritime diplomacy.[47] The Seychelles has benefitted from Indian maritime diplomacy largely by way of financial support, the receipt of equipment, and provision of training with key thematic focus areas including dealing with the challenges of piracy; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and drug trafficking.[48] To this end, India has undertaken to provide a coastal surveillance radar system as well as to deploy a surveillance aircraft, both of which would serve to enhance the Seychelles' maritime domain awareness.[49]

India has attempted to secure strategic bases in both Mauritius and the Seychelles. India entered discussions with Mauritius in the mid-2000s about acquiring a long-term lease of the Agaléga islands, set in waters in the direction of the Seychelles and close to the strategic Mozambique Channel. While the official purpose for its use was said to be tourism, the speculation was that India would upgrade the airstrip on the island for use by surveillance aircraft. Venter notes that discussions on the matter came to a halt "due to political sensitivities concerning the local Creole population – contemplating, perhaps, the complaints of Diego Garcians who were dispossessed of their islands following a deal between the British and Mauritian governments."[50] Nevertheless, India's recent construction of port facilities and a long airstrip on the north island has raised questions with both the Indian and Mauritian governments denying that the development is meant to become a naval base.[51] Meanwhile, India had also sought a joint naval base with the Seychelles at Assumption Island, but the Seychelles ultimately decided against this, which Cabestan explains comes in an effort to not alienate a potential partnership with China. Its rival thus poses some competition for influence in a realm that New Delhi would feel falls into a region where its own dominance should prevail.[52]

What is perhaps most interesting about the relationship India has with these two islands is the fact that its involvement has extended beyond the normal sovereign divide between states, with India providing direct support and leadership on matters of national security. Schöttli notes that "the Indian navy has long played a role in Seychellois domestic politics and in the country's national security apparatus,"[53] while the same can be said for Mauritius. McDougall and Taneja explain that Mauritius is willingly subordinate to India and happily accepts India as a regional leader where maritime security is concerned, deferring to its authority on these matters.[54] Dahiya cites Brewster who argues that "India may not only be a cooperative security provider, but may also effectively act as a security guarantor, as is arguably the case with Mauritius and the Maldives."[55]

Indeed, India has also shared friendly relations with the Maldives, establishing relations after the island nation's independence in the 1960s. India's foreign affairs ministry describes extensive financial support for the Maldivian government, including assistance following the 2004 tsunami, two US$100 million credit facilities extended in 2008 and 2011 respectively, while also noting investment by Indian companies in tourism and infrastructure development, naturally having maritime aspects.[56] Since then, India has provided loans for budgetary support and assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic to cushion the tourism industry, while putting in place a cargo ferry service between the countries to enhance sea connectivity and trade.[57] The countries also cooperate on defence issues in partnership with Sri Lanka, with India taking a "need-driven" approach.[58]

However pivotal these relations, India nonetheless faces competition from China in the IOR. Mauritius, for its part, does not want to miss out on potential opportunities for trade, investment, and financial assistance from what is already one of its biggest trade partners.[59] For the Seychelles, relations with China are blossoming, with the island being prioritised by China in terms of relations with African states.[60] In the Maldives too, India has seen ties being bruised under the tenure of Abdulla Yameen, who was ousted from power in 2018. During Yameen's tenure, there was a "very heavy tilt towards China."[61] India's own high commissioner there, Sunjay Sudhir, noted in an interview with *The Print* that India does not begrudge the Maldives these relations, but does feel that India should come first – *primus inter pares* – rather than there being an approach of 'only India.'[62] It is worth mentioning, however, that India may not necessarily enjoy a positive perception amongst ordinary Maldivians: 2020 saw growing anti-Indian sentiment that manifested in the 'India Out' social media campaign and physical protests. A campaigner has noted that the source of displeasure is India's military presence in the Maldives, but others trace the sentiment back to Yameen's time in power, bringing forth an internal divide with some segments of the population favouring China over India.[63] Rasheed notes that India has taken a different tack here in countering Chinese influence: it provided support for a defence agreement between the Maldives and the United States of America in September 2021, seeing it as being able to play a part in curbing China's engagement in the IOR. Following Yameen's exit and the installation of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, India has been able to exert more influence, and has seen a greater appetite for enhanced security cooperation, with its navy providing training to Maldivian forces.[64]

India also extends its diplomatic activities to Madagascar and the Comoros. India has operated a monitoring station in the northern part of Madagascar since 2008 and in 2018 signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation, emphasising maritime safety and security, anti-piracy, IUU fishing, as well as naval cooperation. With the Comoros, India also has a defence cooperation MoU, has provided a $20 million credit facility for the island to acquire high-speed interceptor boats and to enhance

the capabilities of the National Agency of Maritime Affairs, to add to a $2 million gift for this purpose.[65]

The East African Littoral

An obvious opportunity for cooperation in East Africa was presented by the scourge of Somali piracy in the late 2000s to mid-2010s. In an effort to live up to its role as a net security provider, the Indian Navy conducted anti-piracy patrols in the waters off the Horn of Africa and successfully thwarted a number of attacks while also escorting thousands of vessels through the International Recognised Transit Corridor.[66]

At a bilateral level, India has employed maritime diplomacy quite deliberately with countries spanning the East African littoral – from Djibouti, down to Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and South Africa. Starting with Djibouti, this was an important strategic pivot not only for its anti-piracy work but also at the time of Operation Raahat, during which India rescued 3,000 of its nationals stranded in Yemen in 2015. Since then the two countries have expressed an interest in expanding their cooperation in the area of maritime security. With Kenya, India conducts regular port visits and has signed a number of memoranda of understanding on maritime issues, notably maritime surveillance, information sharing, and joint hydrographic surveys. Coming to Tanzania, India loaned the country US$92 billion to fund the rehabilitation of Zanzibar's water supply system in the late 2010s. Where Mozambique is concerned, India has provided periodic patrols in the Mozambique Channel and, most recently, diverted Indian ships to assist with the destruction wrought by Cyclone Idai in 2019.[67] With South Africa, economics is at the forefront of relations, and cooperation on maritime matters happens more substantively via multilateral initiatives like IBSAMAR, a regular naval exercise held between India, Brazil, and South Africa.[68]

West Africa

India's maritime diplomacy on the West African littoral has served an altogether different security need: energy. India's energy demands are expected to double in the period 2002–2030 and this consideration alongside periods of energy shortages in India means that its energy security necessarily becomes an important aspect of its foreign policy. Crude oil is the second largest contributor to India's energy mix, and the country relies on imports for the vast majority of its oil needs. Thus, in securing its energy supply, India's state-owned oil company has invested in oil fields and refineries around the world, notably in the West African states of Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, the Ivory Coast, and Nigeria. This speaks to an "Indian ambition to increase the share of oil that is imported from Indian-owned fields abroad."[69] Singh notes that India faces competition from other Asian countries in securing

these resources and while he indicates that West African energy imports are not a core element of its energy security policy, but comes as part of a bid to diversify its energy mix.[70] Indeed, as the world moves towards more renewable energies, India will have to work to continue to stave off pressure to itself move away from oil, gas, and coal; this has already generated some diplomatic tension as noted at the United Nations' climate change summit in Glasgow in November 2021. Further, while this engagement does not presently have an overtly maritime quality, it has the potential to evolve into its maritime diplomatic practice given ongoing maritime security threats in West Africa being closely tied to energy resources, notably the oil industry.

Regional Fora

Luke refers to the IOR as "a veritable alphabet soup of sub- and intra-regional groupings, sometimes of limited effectiveness, and reflecting the fact that the region is more of a geographical entity than a political one,"[71] whatever India's aspirations may be. For the purpose of this chapter, we look to some of the larger and longer-standing initiatives.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (or IORA and previously known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation) was established in 1997 after South Africa's Nelson Mandela noted during a visit to India the need for such a forum. IORA's *raison d'être* is to enhance socio-economic cooperation among member states, while cultivating an Indian Ocean identity among member states.[72] IORA is an initiative which observers have held much hope for, and which was widely celebrated at the outset, but many scholars now deem the organisation to be something of a disappointment, with them variously noting a lack of political will, poor organisational design, limited resources, and limp leadership amid differing needs and interests of members as being the reasons for its humdrum performance.[73] While not wanting to be domineering, India has neither been able to leverage the geostrategic importance of and interest in the IOR for meaningful outcomes.

In keeping with its leadership role in the IOR, India established the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008, inviting all navies of littoral states on the Indian Ocean to join, seeing initial enthusiasm.[74] Ghosh suggests that the forum quickly lost its lustre and now "meanders along with its meetings."[75] IONS holds biannual events attended by naval staff and has three working groups that cooperate on maritime security, information sharing and interoperability, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[76]

The IOZOP, as mentioned, was a Sri Lankan proposal but has also found Indian support. It was put to the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, with the ostensible goal of halting foreign military activity in the region and limiting the use of the IOR as a stage for power contestation between superpowers in the Cold War era.[77] The presence of foreign military bases persist to this day and remain an issue of contention, as alluded to earlier herein. In theory, the

achievement of a zone of peace would assist in further entrenching India's regional power, but evidently in practice the proposal has come to nought.

Conclusion

India has a long-standing history with African nations, expanding in number in recent years. Its role and level of engagement diffuse as proximity diminishes, in line perhaps with its areas of strategic interest. Indeed, the Indian Ocean islands receive the most attention from India and likewise India finds the most traction there, drawing on soft power cultural links to the extent that it is able to exert influence over strategy, policy, and national security in a rather overt manner. That is not to say that its strategic execution does not also operate at a covert level: in point of fact, India continues to face off with China and finds Chinese competition in the IOR too, which it must play off sensitively, as the Indian Ocean island nations seek to leverage their relationships with both of these regional powers to their own benefit. In West Africa, India is seeking to serve narrower and more specific interests, but here nonetheless lies potential for its energy security interests to bleed into its maritime diplomacy.

Meanwhile, regional fora in the IOR have, on the whole, had limited impact and success, with some scholars, like Luke, noting that the region's growing significance will require a more effective multilateral forum in years to come.[78] This could present an opportunity for Indian leadership, but this prospect will likewise likely be restrained by existing political dynamics and rivalries, unless India is able to counter the offering from China, which in turn would require continued domestic growth.

Several critics suggest that India's material abilities do not match its strategic aspirations for power and leadership in the region and on the global stage. Be this as it may, India looks set to continue to pursue leadership in the IOR and African maritime domain, not least in exercising its self-appointed role as net security provider as a feature of its 'manifest destiny.' Whether India's hankering for dominance in the IOR – because this is its neighbourhood and because it wishes to counter China – results in outcomes equal to its imagination or not, it is a matter of both geostrategy and pride for India, and will thus not be abandoned as a strategic prong.

It seems that in seeking out territories in which it can expand its power and influence in order to balance against China, it nonetheless faces up with its nemesis there too. India's competition with China will continue to underlie its strategic considerations and thus play out in its diplomacy, and indeed maritime diplomacy, in an African theatre.

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