



ISLAND DIPLOMACY: AN EMERGING TREND IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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From January 18 to 20, 2023, the External Affairs Minister of India, Dr. S. Jaishankar, visited the island nations of the Maldives and Sri Lanka. This visit not only strengthened New Delhi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy but also gave impetus to India's island diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). While addressing the press conference in Male, he remarked that India and the Maldives are good neighbours, strong partners, have mutually invested in development, and also have a responsibility for peace and security in the region.¹ Thus, pointing towards the growing role of islands in India's foreign policy outlook.

Over the last two decades, China has considerably increased its presence through diplomatic, military, and economic footprints in the region, which have generated parleys on the strategic viability of the same. In December 2022, Beijing hosted a China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation in association with its chief aid-providing agency, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA).² Thus signalling towards the institutionalisation of its role in the region, which India regards as its front yard.

To this end, the role of both small and big islands is quintessential in securing the region and helping India play the role of a leading player in the region. Moreover, with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a playground of cooperation, contestation, confrontation, and conflict among the world's major powers, India's role becomes pertinent in a region where it is centrally located.

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Importance of the Indian Ocean Region

The IOR spans from the eastern coast of Africa to the western shores of Australia. The region is also considered as the primary area of responsibility of the Indian Navy.³ Occupying 40 per cent of the strategic waters, India forms the heartland of the region. Since ancient times, this vast region has been at the crossroads of marines, navies, and merchants.

Its vast maritime and continental expanse comprises 38 countries ranging from continental islands to archipelagos, islands, atolls, and festoons in nature. Strategically, the region is further important due to the presence of chokepoints like the Straits of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Madagascar Straits, Straits of Malacca, and Ombai-Wetar Straits, which act as bridges between the economies of the East and the West. Therefore, any form of hurdle in the movement of trade, especially oil and gas, through these sea lanes of communications (SLOCs), can prove to be a hindrance in the global supply chains. Furthermore, the region is rich in hydrocarbon reserves, rare earth materials like polymetallic nodules, and fertile fishing grounds along the coastlines.

The region is not free from challenges and is at the crossroads of climate-induced risks like rising sea levels, increasing sea temperatures, cyclones, changes in precipitation patterns, oil spills, etc. Apart from the weather-related calamities, certain non-traditional threats like drug smuggling, human trafficking, piracy, and sea-based terrorism also blot the region. Additionally, various biodiversity hotspots in the region require constant conservation mechanisms. Thus, the region has both inherent strengths and weaknesses.

Importance of Islands for India

The global transformation taking place in the post-Cold War era, concomitant with the rising ambitions of India in the region and its neighbourhood make it relevant for India to not only focus on its territorial neighbours but also keep the maritime neighbourhood intact. The islands have acted as a platform for the engagement of various powers through their extended areas of jurisdiction like La Réunion (France), Cocos Islands (Australia), or Deigo Garcia (naval base of the US given by the UK). Their viability for logistics facilities like refuelling and conducting maritime domain awareness further inflates their significance.

Most of the island nations demand significant developments in areas like fulfilling sustainable development goals, mitigating climate change, disaster management, blue economy, developing resilient infrastructure, and renewable energy. These are areas in which India has a considerable advantage and has achieved some remarkable progress. Hence, any further engagement will widen the grounds for convergence and support India's island diplomacy.

Economically, a robust engagement with the island states will allow India to facilitate the interlinkage and interdependence of these small islands by diversifying the market options for their products in India and vice versa. Strategically, partnering with the island states gives a boost to India's maritime diplomacy and helps maintain a stable regional security architecture. Therefore, islands should be looked at as stepping stones to opportunity, which will allow India to widen its presence and influence and maintain a leadership role in the region.

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Any vacuum left by India provides space for China to increase its engagements. As a staunch supporter of sovereignty and a hardliner in practising strategic autonomy, India has earned considerable goodwill in the region.

Stepping Up India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region

Despite the importance attached to the region, New Delhi's role and responsibilities have been rather limited. Until recently, New Delhi's strategic focus on territorial threats left the maritime domain largely ignored.⁴ Now, as the maritime domain is gaining more significance, especially due to the changing geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, New Delhi's role has become more pertinent. Four factors which will potentially allow India to maintain a leadership role in the region are diplomacy and capability building, information dominance, military potential, and economic prowess (acronym DIME).

Diplomatic ties are a pillar of strength for India due to its civilisational and diasporic ties with most of the island countries. In the last decade, India's island diplomacy has witnessed an upswing with the high-level visits undertaken by the Prime Minister, President, Vice President, and External Affairs Minister. Recognising the importance of the region, India has further rebooted its presence in the IOR through Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)⁵ doctrine and the Colombo Security Conclave among the senior officials of Mauritius, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India. To play the role of an effective and active net security provider in the region, India provided medical assistance and food aid under Mission SAGAR. This affirms the contributing role played by India towards the island countries of Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, the Seychelles, and the Maldives. Diplomatic initiatives like these allow India to play the role of a regional security provider in the region.

To further enjoy primacy in the region, India needs to deepen and strengthen its diplomatic footprint by increasing the visibility of the island states in the institutional

organisations spanning across the region. For instance, as the G20 President, India has invited Mauritius as a special invitee to a Disaster Risk Reduction working group.⁶

One of the challenges through which India will have to navigate swiftly is the political upswing between pro-India and pro-China dispensations in some of the island nations like the Maldives. Under the current dispensation, India has enjoyed a comfortable juncture with the Mohamed Nasheed government, as opposed to his predecessor Abdulla Yameen, who allowed greater Chinese impressions and traces, apart from spearheading the 'India Out' campaign in Male.⁷

India is leading global initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Risk Reduction and Infrastructure (CDRI), which are congruent with the climate-related demands of the island states. Capability building in these areas will allow it to create a niche for itself. Like the effective tele-health and tele-education programs in Africa, India can further deepen its diplomatic inroads by providing skill development in these areas.

The second area that will allow India to enjoy the orchestration is by having information dominance in its primary area of responsibility. Non-traditional challenges at sea and climate-related events like cyclones require India to have and provide a well-knitted information apparatus in the region. To this end, India launched the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2018 to respond to challenges like drug smuggling, human trafficking, and illegal fishing.

With nearly 350 Chinese ships and submarines spanning the IOR anytime, it lends enough importance for India to have an eagle's eye on any of the inimical activities.⁸ As SLOCs crisscross the region, the security of the seas is intricately linked to economic growth. At the first Multi-Agency Maritime Security Group meeting, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, commented that the Indian Ocean is a great asset, and the more India grows, the more assets it creates, and vulnerabilities are bound to be proportionate to the assets.⁹ One of the important challenges that India needs to confront is the denial of access to foreign intelligence agencies seeking to conduct espionage activities.¹⁰ In this regard, island nations can be to India's advantage in conducting maritime domain awareness (MDA). The present government has also approved the National Maritime Domain Awareness Project to strengthen its actionable intelligence in the IOR.¹¹

India can further enmesh sea-based intelligence with space-based intelligence through the satellite system, thus benefiting from more precision and accuracy.¹² India has already signed MDA agreements with France and Japan. The intelligence and information infrastructure further needs to be tightened by bringing all the islands under the coastal surveillance radar network. Currently, Madagascar and the Comoros, which are located near the chokepoint of the Madagascar Strait, are not covered.

Militarily, the Indian Navy has acted as a net security provider in the region by undertaking various mission-based deployments and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) activities. However, as India is diversifying its defence export and import partners while also undertaking *Aatmanirbharta*, it should focus on providing an advanced weapon system and patrol vessels to island states to undertake surveillance of the high seas.

Only a strong, confident, and economically engaged India can have the ability and capability to play a larger role in the region. India has undertaken some

key infrastructure projects like the Greater Male Connectivity Project, Hanimaadhoo Airport, Hulhumale Cricket Stadium, Gulhifalu Port in the Maldives;¹⁴ Social Housing Project, Civil Service Institution, and 8 Megawatt Solar PV Farm Project in Mauritius; signing MOUs with Comoros on defence cooperation,¹⁵ tele-education and tele-health; and training diplomats from Madagascar at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service.¹⁶

However, this might not be enough for India to play a leadership and influential role among the island states. The contraction of the foreign aid provided by India further pulls down its economic influence. Accordingly, India has launched the Trilateral Development Corporation (TDC) Fund¹⁷ to shoulder the burden by bringing the public and private sectors together to undertake infrastructure projects across the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

With India taking over the reins of the G20 Presidency and further diversifying its partners in the region according to its diplomatic, military, political, and economic needs, it needs to locate the Indian Ocean islands in its strategy. The taxonomy of the Indo-Pacific region is incomplete without the importance of the IOR in it. As India is getting ready for the world and making the world ready for India, it's an opportune moment to utilise its diplomatic strings, political will, economic prowess, and technological heft, as well as its and military engagements, to deepen and tighten its role among the island states of the IOR.

The focus should be on demand-driven and need-based development, and efforts should be put into developing smart islands, sister cities, sustainable islands, and collaborations on the blue economy. It also remains to be seen how India, as a member of a multilateral institution like QUAD, leverages its key position by maximising its reach and not limiting it to one country or a region.

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Notes:

- ¹ Ministry of External Affairs of India, “Press Statement by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Joint Press Conference With the Foreign Minister of Maldives”, January 18, 2023, <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.m?36131/+Statement+by+External+Affairs+Minister+Dr+S+Jaishankar+at+the+Joint+Press+Conference+with+the+Foreign+Minister+of+Maldives>. Accessed on March 1, 2023.
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- ³ Indian Navy, “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”, January 25, 2016, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf. Accessed on January 28, 2023.
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- ⁶ Ministry of External Affairs of India, “G-20 and India’s Presidency”, Press Information Bureau, December 10, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1882356#:~:text=India’s special invitee guest countries,%2C Singapore%2C Spain and UAE>. Accessed on January 31, 2023.
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- ⁹ Raghav Bikhchandani, “At 1st Maritime Security Group Meet, NSA Chief Doval Stresses on Coordination Among Stakeholders”, *The Print*, June 30, 2022, <https://theprint.in/defence/at-1st-maritime-security-group-meet-nsa-chief-doval-stresses-on-coordination-among-stakeholders/1019264/>. Accessed on January 31, 2023.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ n. 7.
- ¹² Darshana M. Baruah, “Strengthening Delhi’s Strategic Partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region”, Center for a New American Security, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/strengthening-delhis-strategic-partnerships-in-the-indianocean>. Accessed on January 31, 2023.
- ¹³ “Ministry of External Affairs of India, “India-Maldives Bilateral Relations”, https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Maldives_2022.pdf. Accessed on February 1, 2023.
- ¹⁴ “Development Partnership Key Pillar of India-Mauritius Ties: PM Narendra Modi”, *The Indian Express*, January 21, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/narendra-modi-india-mauritius-ties-7734499/>. Accessed on January 31, 2023.

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