

French Interests in Indian Ocean Region: A Path for Defence and Energy Security

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The Indian Ocean has occupied a very important place in the history of mankind. Almost all the countries of the world are interested in the Indian ocean and most of the developed countries have bases in the Indian ocean, namely USA, Russia, Germany, China, UK, Japan and France. The littoral countries are mostly developing nations and henceforth don't hesitate to provide bases to these countries. The bases are purely established for military purposes and also to protect the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean to see that energy supply is not interrupted in the time of any crisis in the region. France has shown a very keen interest in the Indian Ocean and still retains the le reunion islands, Mayotte and latest addition is its presence in Abu Dhabi. With India also France maintains very good relations and have also conducted many naval exercises and supplied submarines to India and Pakistan. The French interest is also related to defence and energy security. This paper tries to briefly show the importance of the Indian Ocean to France and analyse its relations with the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean.

Keywords Indian ocean, France, la reunion islands, Mayotte, India, energy security.

Sea power and power on land are inextricably interwoven in practically all situations. The Indian Ocean area is no exception to the general rule. This is confirmed by the events since ancient times. The old saying that he who commands the sea has command of everything was true in the olden times as much as it is today. A study of the history of sea power in the Indian Ocean clearly illustrates this point. It was not possible for any Power till a couple of centuries ago to exercise any decisive influence in the Indian Ocean on account of its enormous size. Different countries dominated different sectors or parts of the ocean. Modern history of the ocean begins with the voyage of Vasco da Gama in 1494, at a time when neither any littoral or outside power was of any consequence in the ocean. At the time of the Portuguese arrival Maritime traffic was almost entirely in the hands of Arab Muslim sailors, but no naval political control was exercised by any power in the Indian Ocean. In order to secure the maximum exploitation of the wealth of these areas, Portugal wished to monopolize to its own advantage the entire Maritime trade. To that effect Lisbon endeavoured to place the Indian Ocean under its naval military control (Ramazani & Vali, 1978). The Portuguese had a true sense of politics and strategy and therefore they gave attention to both the major sectors – east – west – of this vast expanse of water. In spite of this, they could not hold on for more than about a century. The Dutch entered the scene in the late 16th and the early 17th centuries. The French and British initiated their efforts and competition in the following decade of the 17th century (Raizada, 1994).

By the early 18th century France started showing interest in the Indian Ocean region. The wars that ensued between French and the British during the 18th and early 19th century determined the outcome of the struggle which these two imperial powers fought for the control of India and the ocean surrounding it. The French navy's strongholds in the middle of the Indian Ocean, the Mascarene Islands, the bases from which the French directed a commercial war against enemy shipping. In 1810-11 The Mascarenes, the principal Island being Isle de France (Mauritius), were captured by the British. The Seychelles were taken earlier (1794) (Ramazani & Vali, 1978). Britain's sway over the Indian Ocean became more or less complete, a situation which continued for a century and a half. The Indian Ocean obviously could not escape the logic of the political changes that were taking place in the world. The decolonisation process which started after the First World War was almost completed after the Second World War. Most of the major islands or groups of islands and

the countries around the Indian Ocean have also become independent countries. All the new countries are members of the United Nations. The Indian Ocean area comprising the third largest body of water and its littoral and hinterland is vast and is a crucial significance, its importance is mainly attributed to its geo-political setting.

The Geopolitical Setting of the Indian Ocean

Geography provides the basis for historical, political as well as cultural and economic developments. The Indian Ocean is no exception in this respect. The Indian Ocean is an enormous gulf surrounded by the continents of Africa, Asia and Australia. The Indian Ocean is over 6,500 miles in length (North to South) and nearly 6,000 miles in breadth (East to West). It covers nearly 20.6 percent of the total Oceanic area of the world. Its area and the distance are thus enormous. The Indian Ocean is in the South, it is closed towards the North. This distinguishes the Indian Ocean from the other two oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific, which stretch from the North Pole to Antarctica, a circumstance that in many respects determined the particular character of the ocean named after India. Another peculiarity of the Indian Ocean involves the Northern portion, which is historically and geo strategically one of the most important. This portion of the Indian Ocean is accessible from the West and from the East only through narrow straits. In the West, these narrow streets lead to two culs-de-sac, the Persian Gulf and The Red Sea (Ramazani & Vali, 1978). The Persian Gulf and The Red Sea are the gulfs of the Indian Ocean and therefore, belong to this oceanic system. On the Eastern side, the Indian Ocean is separated from the Pacific by the Indonesian Island chain (and the narrow passage between the Islands) and by the Australian continent. In the North, the Indian Ocean is boarded by the Asian landmass, the Indian subcontinent, like a huge tongue, lashes out into its waters and divide its northernmost portion between what is known as the Arabian Sea and bay of Bengal (Ramazani & Vali, 1978). Its physical configuration is such that it provides certain choke points of control, which power controls the Suez Canal, the Malacca straits and the Cape of Good Hope and the Australian waters can exercise significant control over the Indian Ocean region.

The Indian Ocean region has around its periphery recently independent countries at various levels of development. This region is dominated by instability which stems from various causes, internal and external. Among the causes can be explosive growth of population, economic and social problems. External causes can be the inherent feeling of insecurity among the neighbours, fear of judgement ambitions by the state in the region and most important traditional and historic antagonism. These are some of the reasons that today we also find extra regional powers present in the Indian Ocean. First it is the strategic importance and secondly it is economic viability. The Indian Ocean area has been and still is an area where because of its strategic importance, the rivalries of the great powers from outside the region are played out. Therefore the reasons for its strategic importance are its geographical location and also the important sea routes which traverse it, in addition to this the wealth of the natural resources of the densely populated countries on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The current paper tries to explore the reasons driving France, currently one of the key players in the Indian Ocean Region, to consolidate their position in the region.

France's Interest in the Indian Ocean Region

France is an Indian ocean region state having the territories of Mayotte and La Reunion islands. In addition, a large EZZ 4100 French personnel are stationed in the Indian Ocean at different locations including deployments at both the overseas territories, the Djibouti and Abu Dhabi (Bigot, Chabanet, Cuet & Cauvin, 2019). France has traditionally held a high degree of influence in the Western Indian Ocean region and uses its cultural ties, external territories and military power to maintain its regional presence. The Indian Ocean region is also important to France due to its strategic location and energy security needs. France's regional influence is under threat from growing economies such as China, India and Brazil.

While current French tactics will increase France's influence in the Indian Ocean region in the short and medium terms, it is likely to lose influence over the longer term. France has a long standing presence in the Western Indian Ocean, despite the loss of its colonial possessions in India, Mauritius, Madagascar and the Seychelles, France retains the territories of La Reunion, Mayotte and the French southern and Antarctic territories. The former colony of Djibouti remains economically and literally close to France, while relations with the United Arab Emirates have progressed to the hosting of a French military base in Abu Dhabi. For France, the Indian Ocean region or at least its Western reaches, continue to be of strategic importance.

During the last hundred years, France's attention has been focused on the Western section of the Indian Ocean area, particularly the Horn of Africa and the islands along the East African coast where Madagascar, the third largest island of the world, formed the most precious French colonial possession. Since the end of World War II, the control exercised by Paris over its Indian Ocean possessions has undergone radical changes. France has 5000 strong RDF based at Djibouti and the second largest fleet in the Indian Ocean to safeguard its political and economic interests as well as to look after its Island territories of Reunion, Illes Crozet, Kerguelen and Mayotte (Nanda, 1994). The Reunion Island is a French dependency. It lies roughly in the centre of the Indian Ocean. 150 miles to the South West of Mauritius, 450 miles from Malagasy and 1350 miles from the African mainland, 1300 miles South of the Seychelles, 1600 miles from Diego Garcia, 2900 miles from Aden and 2800 miles from India (Nanda, 1994). After its withdrawal from Malagasy the French established its military based on this Island, it has an airfield and a radio relay station on the island. Djibouti is another important base for the French. France strengthened its forces in Djibouti after the pull out of its forces in Malagasy in 1973. The French base is of immense strategic importance to the Western powers. From this base situated in North East Africa at the head of the Gulf of Aden, entrance to the Red, across the bar-al-made strait and adjacent to the Southwest tip of the Arabian Peninsula it is easy to monitor the movements of ships between the Red sea and the Indian Ocean (IDSA, 1980). The floating headquarters of the French Indian ocean fleet are also located here. Besides, they are a score of missile launching units, landing craft and coastal patrol boats. Its area of operations include the Red sea, the Arabian Sea and the Eastern coast of Africa to Singapore.

Economic Importance of Indian Ocean Region

With the exception of Australia, Israel and South Africa all the other countries fall into the category of developing countries. Out of 47 states of the region, 21 have less than 5 million population, and another 6 have populations in the range of 6 to 10 million. Others have populations exceeding 10 million. With the exception of India, South Africa, Pakistan, Israel, Singapore, and Australia and to a limited extent Indonesia, other 40 countries have no viable industrial infrastructure. Primary products constitute a major share of the export of all these countries. The region is endowed with natural resources like crude oil (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and Indonesia), Bauxite (India and Indonesia), Tin, (Malaysia and Indonesia), chromite (South Africa), Copper (Zambia). Some of the less populated countries like Saudi Arabia and Zambia possess some of the most vital and strategic natural resources in substantial quantities which are required for sustaining the economies of the rest of the world in general and the countries of the organisation of economic cooperation and development in particular. With the exception of India, Pakistan, Israel, Australia and South Africa, no other country in the region has any viable military industrial infrastructure³³. There is in this ocean a network of essential trading routes which connect, by way of the Persian Gulf and The Red Sea, the countries of the Far East and Australasia with the Middle East, and by way of the Suez Canal, the Far East and Australia with Europe and America (IDSA, 1982).

Besides this, the above-mentioned natural resources like wool, jute, tea, rubber, tin, copper, gold, diamond, Uranium and magnesium, chromium and most important oil and most of

these oil movements have to go through the Indian Ocean. Approximately 200 tankers a day pass through the Strait of Hormuz bound for Europe, America and Japan. The disruption of this oil flow for any prolonged period would paralysed the economies of the industrialised west and Japan. Western economy now depends on oil and the entire military machine of the west runs on oil, control over the west's oil lifeline is control over the west's life (IDSA, 1982). The geo-economic importance of this region has been further enhanced as far as the western countries and the USA are concerned due to the liberalisation of economies of the countries of South Asia, the MNCs coming into this region in a big way, the US, Japan and western European countries find lucrative markets for their goods. Of particular interest to them is the 250 million middle-class of India, growing rapidly in size and its purchasing power. This naturally can be another reason for western presence in the Indian Ocean.

French Interest vis-a-vis Defence and Energy Security in Indian Ocean

Conceptually, the new fascination for power has resulted in all-encompassing definitions of sea power. A nation's sea power is determined not only by the weapons in armed forces with which it can affect events at sea but also by its merchant Marine Outlook and tradition. Unfortunately, even as the tension in the region has increased and the presence of external forces become highly visible, the response of the littoral countries has been muted. The chief reasons for this are not too far to seek: the intersections of the internal conflict system in the region with big power rivalry, the growing militarisation of region, a decreasing commitment to Indian ocean as a zone of peace and heightened security dependence on big power forged through arms imports and provision of bases, these days euphemistically called facilities (Raghavan, 1996). The West has ignored the plea of the littoral countries who supported Sri Lanka's proposal to declare the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace but the littoral countries on their own had in no way helped to realise this concept. The big powers have their own vested interests in the Indian Ocean region and they do not like these small Ocean littoral countries to gang up against them. At the same time, they do not like to incur the displeasure of the littoral countries by rejecting their demands nor want to give their consent on the Indian Ocean, since such an action will affect their interests. Hence, they try to postpone resolving the issues indefinitely (IDSA, 1980).

Defence expenditure has been on increase in this region. This area as a whole has shown a continuous increase in defence expenditure. More than 75 per cent of the defence expenditure in the region is incurred by countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, Israel, South Africa, Australia, Egypt and Pakistan (Nanda, 1994). Among the countries which have the highest defence expenditure, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Australia all the other countries fought one or more than one war. Probably one can attribute this as an important factor for the trend in defence expenditure in these countries.

Defence expenditure is consistently going up mostly due to arms transfer. The arms producing countries with the modern weapons in turn stimulate the necessary demand. With the end of the cold war and after the gulf war, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has been further enhanced for the US and its Western allies and Japan. There are important developments that are taking place in the Indian Ocean, one of the most important is the extension of reach of the Blue water Navy of China with its base coming up in Burma and the access it has to Pakistani naval bases. The Indian Navy, which too is a Blue water navy and has come on its own, to safeguard its Maritime interests in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan Navy grew to its present size due to the benevolence of the US. Pakistan is fast replacing the ships it had on lease from the US with purchases from Western Europe (Nanda, 1994). The littoral states of the Indian Ocean have been increasing their naval forces to protect their independence and sovereignty. The main concern of these states has been the nuclear factor which was introduced in the Indian Ocean by the US and the erstwhile USSR. Southeast Asian countries have been concentrating on modernizing their navies. Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have strong navy and their presence can be felt in the Malacca

straits. These countries feel threatened with such large naval strength of the Japanese Navy as also the Chinese Navy operating through these straits. The Soviet Union had adequate strength to maintain balance of power and also safeguard the interests of South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. With that balancer gone the littoral states have started to feel threatened by the US and China. Australia has expressed concern over the growth of Indian naval strength. The US has for the time being no power to break its monopoly in the control of the Indian Ocean. China is not yet capable of challenging it. However, China does maintain surveillance against US Nuclear missile submarines in the Indian Ocean as China can easily be targeted by them. The extra regional navies having permanent presence in the Indian Ocean have forced the regional navies to grow at a prohibitive cost to their respective exchequers of these countries. Especially in an environment of insecurity and instability that is prevailing, the regional powers will try to counter the extra regional navies and as far as possible maintain the existing balance of power. One fall out of this has been the arms race in the region which has turned out to be beneficial to the arms producing countries. Arms transfers have become a regular feature of this region.

Much of France's activities in the region have been defence related, with Paris operating a number of military bases in the region. France maintains a naval base, Pointe des Galets, on its Island department of La Reunion, East of Madagascar. The base hosts 3 patrol vessels, a transport ship and a frigate. This helps to ensure that there is a constant French naval base in the southern Indian Ocean, as well as in close proximity to the sea lines of communication of the Southern and Eastern coast of Africa (US Energy Information Administration, 2020). France also bases members of its armed forces in Djibouti, a former French colony which maintains strong ties with France. The fifth overseas interarms regiment of the French army is based in the country. France also bases some of its fighter aircraft at Ambouli airport, the main airport in Djibouti. The military presence in Djibouti ensures France has a constant strategic presence in East Africa as well as along the crucial sea lines of communication between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. The latter reason is highly significant as it carries the bulk of France's energy imports. France is a major importer of crude oil, importing just under 1.3 million barrels per day in 2010²³. The US and Japan also operate bases in Djibouti, further illustrating the strategic significance of the tiny country to Western interests in the region (Maupin, 2017).

In 2009, France opened its first foreign base in the Middle East, Camp la Paid (peace camp), in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The base encompasses three military camps- a land base which houses around 100 troops, a naval base and an air base at nearby Al-Dhafer which contains three Mirage 2000-5 multi-role combat aircraft. Based in French Somaliland/Djibouti from 1962, the 13th of Demi-Bridge of foreign legion was transferred to the UAE on 13th June 2011. Located adjacent to the junction of the Persian gulf and the strait of Hormuz, the Abu Dhabi base has increased the French presence in the region and may be used by Paris to help ensure the stability of its energy security requirements from the Persian gulf²⁴. The French bases in La Reunion, Mayotte and the UAE have led to a quadrilateral in the Indian Ocean region. This covers the sea lines of communication from the Middle East to Europe, which includes the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Red sea. As a leading military power, France's military presence in the region-which includes its contribution to the European Union's operation Atlanta anti-piracy task force could be drawn upon to ensure that its energy security requirements are addressed²⁵.

Energy security is also another motivating factor behind France's desire to remain a key actor in the Indian Ocean region. Although France's oil imports from the Middle East have decreased overall imports from that region still amount to over a quarter of all of France's oil imports. Given the rising overall global demand for oil largely from fast growing economies such as China and India, France may feel that its share of oil imports from the Middle East is at risk from the increased competition. This helps to explain why France has used its status as an established and leading economic and military power to cement its influence in the

Indian Ocean region at a time when its competitors are in the developing stages²⁶. The French Navy has also been sending naval units into the Indian Ocean from its home bases on Goodwill, training and flag-showing visits through the Suez Canal, Malacca straits and around the Cape of Good Hope to reinforce its Indian ocean fleet ²⁷. France has reinforced its naval presence in the Indian Ocean mostly to protect its interests. France has oil for arms and oil for trade deals with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran. France has also supplied weapons to South Africa, Pakistan, India and Australia.

France, like any other great power, is interested in the Indian Ocean not only for strategic purposes but also the region has become economically viable with the growing economic power and big markets of the oil producing countries for advanced industrial technology. France is one of the countries which continues to keep a sizable permanent military presence in the region. It has normal interest in the remaining colonial dependencies and former overseas territories, mainly along the east coast of Africa (Maupin, 2017). French posture fits into American plans for protection of Western oil routes from the West Asian oil fields and its overall global interests. Since the mid-70s, after the pull-out of British and Portuguese forces, France has emerged as one of the most important colonial powers by maintaining a sizable military presence in strategic enclaves and islands in the Indian Ocean²⁸. France and the other great powers justify their presence in the Indian Ocean on the pretext of protecting the oil sea lanes, International waters and the need to protect Maritime routes. The French nuclear infrastructure in the Indian Ocean littoral is: Djibouti: Djibouti naval base is a regular deployment point for naval vessels and occasionally visited by aircraft carriers. Air base 188 also supports US P3 deployments and French naval aircraft. La Reunion: The port des gales naval base is visited occasionally by French aircraft carriers when deployed in the Indian Ocean. France also operates the Omega station at Mayotte (Arkin and Fieldhouse, 1985).

To strengthen its presence in the Indian Ocean Region, France maintains warm relations with significant countries in the region, chief among them being India. In December 2010, France sold six scorpene-class conventional diesel-electric submarines to India for US\$ 5 billion and followed a 2005 order from France for six other scorpenes. Two way trade between the countries has also been strong, totalling €6 billion in 2010. Both the countries aimed to double that amount by the end of 2012. France and India signed a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement in 2008, which paved the way for cooperation in that field. A notable result of this agreement was a €7 billion deal for France to build two nuclear power plants in India²⁹. Bilateral relations between France and Pakistan have also strengthened, particularly since the election of Nicholas Sarkozy to the French presidency in 2007. Although France announced abruptly in May 2011 that it would stop sales of heavy equipment to Pakistan, bilateral business and trade relations have gained increasing focus³⁰. Besides these two countries, France tries to maintain cordial relations with Kenya, South Africa and Australia. India and China are also major actors in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

The plea of the Indian Ocean littoral countries to declare the Indian Ocean as a nuclear free zone has fallen on deaf ears of the major powers. There is a continuous process of nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean. The world's oceans could well be the place where the first nuclear war could begin. The world's naval nuclear arsenals include anti-submarine, anti-air and anti-ship weapons. The Indian Ocean as a zone of peace is a dead issue. The US along with its Western allies wants to control the oil sea-lanes and strategic minerals. The presence of outside powers in the Indian Ocean has also increased the arms flow in the region. The littoral countries are drawn in an arms race which has become detrimental to their economic and social progress. The US as the only military superpower has taken upon itself to ensure free flow of oil, and especially after the gulf war, it does not want the oil producing countries ever to hold the Western economies ransom. The US has taken upon itself to safeguard the

political, military and economic interest of the pro-West countries vis-a-vis Iraq and Iran. Besides, the US and its allies are increasingly importing minerals from these littoral countries which are essential to industry and defence. Many of the most important minerals are imported from the most volatile areas of the world, thereby raising fears of the critical disruption of minerals and energy supplies. The US government lists 35 minerals as strategic and it depends heavily on imports from other countries for 23 of them.

France's foreign policy in regard to the Indian Ocean does not differ from French foreign policy elsewhere. Accordingly, as long as France possesses a foothold in the region, it will continue to act in the manner required by an Indian Ocean power. France's Indian Ocean possessions lie along the sea lanes leading from and towards the Suez Canal and those from and towards the Cape route. Its main oil supplies come from the Persian Gulf and pass those shares. France wants to be in the position to protect 'its' sea routes if such a necessity arises. France is a nuclear power and is engaged in nuclear testing. It is interested in tests of other powers, both relating to detonation of nuclear devices and it serves the purpose of monitoring any such activity. Paris is most conscious of the advantages of which naval power can earn through its presence and occasional visits to places of its own control and to foreign harbours. This *politiques du pavilion* (the flag policy) is being used to impress those people who historically have had contacts with France.

In the post-cold war era, changes in global environment, breaking up of nation states and major changes in economic framework have provided new dimensions to Indian Ocean power politics. It is not exclusively military power alone that determines the Indian Ocean power politics as it was in the past, but economic and ideological factors should also be taken into consideration to measure the capabilities. Though superpower confrontation induced conflicts are no longer an issue, but conflicts related to ethnic issues, border clashes, terrorism and issues like ecological restoration may lead to interferences in internal affairs by outside powers which may result in small wars.

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