

# SYNERGIZING INDO-UK STRATEGIC VISION

for the Western Indian Ocean



COUNCIL FOR  
STRATEGIC AND  
DEFENSE RESEARCH

## About this Special Issue

This special issue focuses on the prospects for cooperation between India and the United Kingdom, in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). In light of fresh commitments made by both states to work jointly in several areas, and the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific, the WIO has emerged as a key region where both states could further cooperate. By covering salient issue areas including security, the blue economy, and competition with China, the special issue shall contribute towards better operationalising the 2030 Roadmap and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which outline the future trajectory of the India-UK partnership. It also contains extensive analyses of India's engagement with key African states and the potential for more partnerships in the future. The issue features authors from both India and abroad, who have worked and written extensively on a region that has otherwise witnessed little scholarly attention.

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# Author Profiles

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**Anil Kumar Chawla** retired as the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Navy's Southern Naval Command on 30 November 2021. In his distinguished service spanning four decades, he has held a variety of command, operations, diplomatic, staff, human resource and training appointments. Highly decorated, he is a keen environmentalist and was conferred the prestigious 'Golden Peacock Environment Management Award' in December 2020. Vice Admiral Chawla has authored a number of key policy documents and joint study reports. An expert on maritime strategy, he is an active contributor to various defence journals. He is currently an Eminent Resource Faculty for the Rashtriya Raksha University, and a Distinguished Member of several think tanks, besides being involved in various social and environmental initiatives.

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**Simran Brookes** is Research Assistant for South Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), focusing on UK-India relations. She has a BA in History from University College London and an MSc in International Relations from the University of Bristol.

# Introduction

## Vice Admiral Anil Kumar Chawla (Retd.)

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) occupies a strategic maritime geographic location and comprises a number of resource-rich, yet mainly, developing or under-developed countries, including several small island states. Not surprisingly, the domination of its littoral and the control of its waters have been contested throughout history. This collection of five papers covers a range of contemporary topics by a selection of eminent authors from both the UK and India, who have worked and written extensively on a region that has otherwise witnessed little scholarly attention, which will be of interest to all those who follow maritime issues in the Indian Ocean Region.

Paper 1, "Fighting More than Pirates: Security in the Western Indian Ocean", by Professors Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman, examines security threats that affect the WIO, such as: transnational and environmental crimes; IUU fishing; and natural disasters. It also points out major vulnerabilities in handling these threats, especially the lack of capable maritime forces and an enabling legal framework. The paper correctly highlights that while very few countries in the region possess blue-water capabilities, the presence of a large number of extra-regional maritime forces seems to be more towards addressing China's growing presence across the Indian Ocean, than bolstering regional maritime security. The authors opine that existing regional organisations need to facilitate assistance and capacity-building programmes to WIO countries and recommend the creation of an over-arching pan-WIO maritime architecture through an inclusive dialogue process.

Paper 2, "Cooperation not Competition – Deterring Chinese Aggression", by Vice Admiral Anil Chawla, examines the looming threat from China and how it can be combatted. China's geo-strategic and economic interests in the WIO have intensified after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015. This paper examines the geographical extent and strategic importance of the WIO, and identifies the multi-dimensional security threats that it faces. It then assesses the geo-strategic interests of China in the WIO, maps the recent increase in its economic and military footprint in the region, and identifies key areas where China could present a challenge. Finally, it recommends measures for like-minded democracies, such as India and the UK, to work together towards common goals to mitigate the inroads made by China.

Paper 3 on "Blue Economy and Sustainable Development in the Western Indian Ocean Region: The Case for India-United Kingdom Partnership", by Abhishek Mishra, examines a key economic issue of increasing relevance today – the Blue Economy (BE) of the WIO, which has an assessed natural asset base of US\$333.8 billion and provides a wide array of opportunities for innovation in sectors such as fisheries, ports, maritime transport and shipping. Although the WIO has made progress towards conserving its natural asset base, the ocean ecosystem is under immense pressure from resource exploitation and human-induced habitat degradation. The paper takes stock of the present nature and future potential of sustainable BE development in the WIO, and highlights areas in which India and the UK could collaborate with WIO littorals in developing their BE agenda.

Paper 4, "Redefining Partnerships – Possible Minilateralism in the Western Indian Ocean", by Dr. Gulshan Sachdeva, examines the impact of minilateral arrangements and other related developments in the Indo-Pacific on the Western Indian Ocean. The essay asserts that minilateral groups have an advantage over larger multilateral forums due to limited like-minded memberships and focused agendas. It takes stock of India-Africa trade relations and the contemporary Indo-Pacific narrative, while also bearing a distinct focus on infrastructure connectivity in the region. After analysing developmental partnerships undertaken by India in the WIO, it proceeds to investigate the potential creation of minilateral arrangements in the region between India, other European states such as the UK and France, and key states along the East African Coast.

Paper 5, "East of Suez but West of India – Testing the UK's Potential in the Western Indian Ocean", by Dr. Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Simran Brookes focuses on the prospects for cooperation between India and the United Kingdom, in the WIO. In light of fresh commitments made by both states recently, such as the India-UK Roadmap to 2030, to work jointly in several areas, including maritime security, and the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific, the WIO remains a key region where both states could further cooperate. These could include defence logistics, defence manufacturing, sharing of maritime domain awareness, etc.

The papers will be of particular interest to academicians, research scholars and defence experts in the maritime field. Moreover, by covering salient issue areas of the WIO, including security, the blue economy, and competition with China, this special issue will contribute towards better operationalising the 2030 Roadmap and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which outline the future trajectory of the India-UK partnership.

# Fighting More Than Pirates: Security in the Western Indian Ocean

Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman

## Introduction

With the effective end of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa—international involvement and the considerable material, financial and legal commitments that underpinned it— the region is confronted by a new set of challenges. Chief amongst these is tackling the range of security concerns in the wider ambit of the Western Indian Ocean. For Africa, the prospect of rising interest towards maritime economy with its developmental potential for the continent is offset by growing concerns about security challenges African states face in realising this potential. Three themes stand out in particular: non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism and transnational organised crime; developmental imperatives to ensure growth and stability in African societies; and, the impact of great power competition on African interests in the Western Indian Ocean.

This paper provides a scope of African and broader international positions towards security threats and vulnerabilities in the Western Indian Ocean (littoral and island states) in the context of the continent's developmental needs, and reviews the formative international cooperation in the Western Indian Ocean. It examines key themes that emerge from this assessment, concluding with some thoughts on possible cooperation between the UK and India, based on their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, in supporting and building security in the Western Indian Ocean.

## End of Piracy and the Emergence of New Threats, Insecurities and Vulnerabilities: An African perspective

Somali piracy in the Horn of Africa mobilised the international community as few issues had in its day, drawing a diversity of actors such as the US, Russia, China, India, Japan, several Gulf states, and the EU to participate in a multi-national/lateral campaign to defeat the threat to maritime trade. The United Nations Security Council first adopted a resolution authorising action against piracy in Somalia in June 2008, followed two months later by a resolution (1846) authorising states and regional organisations to enter Somali territorial water to combat piracy. Then again in December 2008, adopting resolution 1851, expanding such authorisation to include operations on land. At the core of the anti-piracy resolutions was the approval that allowed and legitimised foreign naval missions to 'use all necessary means to repress acts of piracy and armed robbery' in the zone. Between 2008 and December 2021, the 'anti-piracy' resolution was renewed annually, even though, since 2017, it became clear that piracy was no longer a burning issue around the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf of Aden.



The renewal of resolution 2608 in December 2021 was only for a period of three months, and in March 2022, following a report on the situation from the Secretary General (S/2021/920), the resolution lapsed, thereby bringing to an end an almost 15 year effort, obviously considered to have been successful, to eradicate the scourge of piracy in the Western Indian Ocean. The non-renewal of the anti-piracy measures also confirmed the government of Somalia's insistence that it was capable of protecting its territorial waters against piracy attacks. In a letter to the Security Council, dated 26 February 2022, Somalia's permanent representative to the United Nations, stated that 'the Federal Government of Somalia is committed to assuming full security responsibility for its national waters in line with national and international law' (Osman, 2022), listing the various efforts under way to ensure such 'full responsibility'.

Not everyone, it should be noted, is convinced that piracy has in fact been defeated. In April 2022, the International Maritime Bureau expressed concern that 'Somali pirates continue to possess the capability and capacity to carry out incidents' and France, the UK and US had urged the renewal of the resolution, arguing that continued anti-piracy measures were necessary for the protection of World Food Programme vessels. Yet, delving deeper into such disagreement, makes it clear that both the security and the political landscape in the Western Indian Ocean has been changing drastically over the past decade, thereby explaining the hesitance on the part of some actors to dismantle the capacities, capabilities and arrangements built up over many years. Furthermore, one can assume that those players so heavily invested in the region would not want to forfeit the justification for their military presence in a part of the world that had increasingly been drawn into geopolitical power contestation.

## New and emerging security threats and vulnerabilities

On the part of Africa, the continent, through the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS) adopted in 2014, acknowledges a range of threats in its maritime domain, and its Indian Ocean littoral and island states, as well as regional organisations, all identify similar threats. In fact, there is remarkable agreement across the many organisations and actors involved in the maritime domain around the threats facing the Western Indian Ocean, with differences largely in emphasis. These threats are mostly in the non-traditional security sphere, and on the part of the African Union largely defined in terms of a human security approach. Chief amongst such threats, as listed in article 16 of the AIMS strategy, are:

- Transnational organised crime (including piracy and armed robbery at sea, maritime terrorism, human trafficking and smuggling, crude oil theft and illegal arms and drug trafficking, to name a few);
- Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and overfishing;
- Environmental crimes; and
- Natural disasters, marine environmental degradation and climate change.<sup>1</sup>

Bueger and Stockbruegger (2022:3-5) refer to 'maritime insecurities' rather than threats, and classify these under three scopes, viz. blue crimes, maritime terrorism and extremist violence at sea, and inter-state rivalries and disputes. The latter is not part of the AIMS list of threats,

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<sup>1</sup>The March 2022 One Earth Future report, 'Stable Seas: Western Indian Ocean', provides a detailed overview of the scope and extent of each of the threats listed in this section. <https://www.stableseas.org/post/stable-seas-western-indian-ocean>

but at the very least, as far as inter-state rivalries are concerned, the AU's Peace and Security Council, at a meeting in June 2016<sup>2</sup>, noted with 'deep concern' the existence of a number of foreign military bases on the continent, and plans for the establishment of new bases. This 'scope' of maritime insecurity has over the past several years seen the militarisation of the Western Indian Ocean, with a large number of states involved, including some new players, such as the Gulf states and Iran and Turkey. What is seldom mentioned explicitly, though, is the extent to which the militarisation of the region is a product of increasing great-power competition in the broader Indo-Pacific, in particular between the US and China, but also between India and China. Underlying much of the concern with threats and vulnerabilities in this region, therefore, is a measure, also, of finding justification for a continued presence, military and political, in the 'post-piracy' era.

Turning to vulnerabilities, AIMS refers to strategic communications systems, a vulnerable legal framework, and the lack of/poorly maintained aids for navigation and hydrographic surveys, nautical charts and maritime safety information. No mention is made of the fact that Africa lacks blue-water navies (South Africa is the only country with such a capability, though budget cuts and related challenges have severely curtailed this capability<sup>3</sup>), thereby severely hampering the continent's ability to address much of what is defined as its maritime threats. The region's overall weak and underdeveloped maritime surveillance, and response capabilities, make for serious vulnerabilities when it comes to promoting maritime security, and is at least part of the reason for its rather heavy dependence on external actors to provide support and protection; in turn, opening the door to growing external interventions and presence.

A mere listing of threats and vulnerabilities, though, gives little sense of the extent and/or intensity of how these are experienced in specific geographical areas of the Western Indian Ocean region, or of the interlinkages amongst threats and vulnerabilities. So, for instance, Somalia is considered to be the state most at risk from climate change, even though the focus is usually on small island states, not least because these states, and Mauritius and Seychelles in particular, have the capacity and political will to drive initiatives related to the threats they face in this domain. Nor does the AIMS list provide the full scope of vulnerabilities. No reference is made, for instance, to the deep vulnerability of coastal communities in the long list of threats and insecurities; nor of the fact that threats and conflicts on land tend to spill over into the maritime domain. The political economy of dhow shipping and the dependencies of the communities involved across a large part of the Western Indian Ocean, both on licit and illicit activities, are seldom considered (see Lendjel and Marei, 2021).<sup>4</sup>

Maritime terrorism, a threat in the Mozambique channel, is a direct consequence of growing radicalisation in Northern Mozambique and the failure of the state to address the deep vulnerabilities of the population, much as Somali piracy grew out of deep frustration with the plundering of the country's marine resources (fisheries in particular), situating it in the sphere of political economy, first and foremost (Samatar et al. 2010:1377). Yet, another dimension could also be added: anti-piracy concerns and actions grew out of a serious threat to

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-601th-meeting-of-the-au-peace-and-security-council-on-early-warning-and-horizon-scanning>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.news24.com/news24/analysis/analysis-andre-wessels-the-centenary-of-the-sa-navy-should-be-used-to-take-stock-20220331>

<sup>4</sup><https://journals.openedition.org/cybergeogeo/37025>

international shipping, i.e. commercial and economic concerns. Similarly, the Mozambican channel is gaining international attention due to the sizeable off-shore gas reserves which makes the area increasingly attractive, and its security important, to states that are dependent on natural gas as a source of energy.<sup>5</sup> Unavoidably, therefore, the question needs to be asked: whose security and vulnerabilities are being addressed by the wide range of African and international efforts and strategies focused on the Western Indian Ocean?

Africa's identification of its maritime security threats and vulnerabilities is firmly located in and against the backdrop of the Declaration of the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace in UNGA resolution 2832 of 1971. This has made for a very specific interpretation of the geography of the Indian Ocean region, not only in terms of traditional security approaches which saw the continent adopt the Pelindaba Treaty in 1996, consigning the continent (land mass and oceans space) to a nuclear-weapons-free zone, but from early independence also in terms of developmental aspirations. African states participating in UNCLOS III in the early 1970s were instrumental in the adoption of the concept 'Exclusive Economic Zone' (EEZ) (with Kenya playing a leading role), expressed in detail in Part V of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>6</sup>, and guarantees access to ocean resources with a view to economic development. Another contribution on the part of African states at the time was the provision made for the participation and rights extended to landlocked states in the UNCLOS regime.

The AU's 2019 Africa's Blue Economy Strategy, referencing the continent's Agenda 2063 (goal 6) and SDG 14, points firmly to the continent's approach to its oceans as a development source, the development of which promises huge dividends: it is aimed at the 'economic exploitation of the resources of oceans... and the conservation of aquatic ecosystems' and the Strategy serves as a 'basis for rational and sustainable use and conservation of natural resources and their natural habitats.' (p1). The driving sectors are tourism (not least because of its job creation potential), the mineral sector (including oil and gas, deep-sea mining and offshore exploration), climate change mitigation and adaptation, the fishery sector, ports and shipping, and education and research (p4). There is a clear alignment between these sectors and what has been identified as threats and vulnerabilities in AIMS.

## Post Piracy Security Audit: International cooperation, regional frameworks and institutions

Counter-piracy operations along the Horn of Africa resulted in almost unprecedented levels of international and multilateral cooperation across political and ideological divisions, pointing to the fact that maritime security is inherently a transnational concern. Yet, international cooperation on maritime security in the region has not been limited to anti-piracy, though this aspect, involving a rather high level of militarisation, attracted perhaps the most attention. Scoping the landscape of actors and institutions engaged in managing the wide range of security threats and vulnerabilities in the Western Indian Ocean is an almost impossible task, ranging as it does from single-issue regimes, such as the 31-member Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (including India and the UK), to the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (its wide remit is captured in its 'new' name) in the Western Indian Ocean, formerly known as the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) with more than 80 members drawn from governments, non-governmental organisations and the shipping industry.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://mg.co.za/africa/2021-09-03-why-the-discovery-of-natural-gas-in-mozambique-has-produced-tragedy/>

<sup>6</sup>CEMLAWS ed

The discussion that follows is therefore in no way exhaustive, but is aimed at identifying the major players and frameworks that cover the Western Indian Ocean. In this respect, the African Union constitutes a major actor in the Western Indian Ocean maritime security domain. Suffice to say that international efforts to build and promote maritime security in the region would have to work and liaise closely with the AU as Africa's premier regional organisation, as well as with its various regional economic communities (RECs) which have all been developing maritime security approaches and strategies. However, the Western Indian Ocean, especially when defined to include the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, also includes non-African states such as Yemen (posing one of the biggest security threats to the region), Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The discussion is divided into two categories: regional frameworks and institutions, and capacity building and coordination programmes.

## Regional frameworks and institutions

**The Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCOC)** was signed in 2009 and has 20 members from the Western Indian Ocean region and the Gulf of Aden and falls under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Originally focused on combating piracy and armed robbery at sea, the DCOC expanded its mandate through the Jeddah Amendment of 2017 to cover a host of illicit activities threatening safety and security at sea, including the dumping of toxic waste and wildlife trafficking, and recognising the importance of the blue economy. India gained observer status in 2020. The major strength of this framework lies in the fact that its membership includes the vast majority of states in the Red Sea region, the Indian Ocean littoral states (right down to South Africa) and the island states (with the exception of Reunion). Interestingly, Ethiopia, a landlocked country, is a member of the DCOC. The DCOC also has some weaknesses, in that members' political interests differ, and this has inhibited the sharing of information in terms of maritime domain awareness (MDA). Some member states, such as Tanzania and Mozambique, do not have maritime strategies and little capacity to develop such strategies, yet this forms an important component of benefiting from membership of the DCOC.

Three regional institutions are of direct relevance when considering the institutionalisation of maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean.

The first is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), established in 1997, counting 23 members in 2022. It is, though, an organisation that spans the full Indian Ocean region, including in its membership India, Indonesia and Australia, as well as France (on the basis of Reunion being a 'department' of France in the Indian Ocean), and its dialogue partners include China, Russia, Japan and the UK. Amongst its priority areas are maritime safety and security, disaster risk management and the blue economy. A potential strength of IORA is its establishment of the Indian Ocean Dialogue in 2013, a track 1.5 forum for discussing issues of strategic importance in the Indian Ocean. Given the membership scope (and the number of

big powers that make up the organisation's dialogue partners), this flagship programme<sup>7</sup> may conceivably be turned into the equivalent of the Shangri-La Dialogue series, or the Munich Defence Conference, focusing specifically on the Western Indian Ocean, also in the context of this region's position, thus far under-considered, in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is the second regional organisation deeply involved in and exposed to maritime insecurities and vulnerabilities in the Western Indian Ocean. Its membership is confined to the island states of the region – Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion and Seychelles, and it is considered to play an essential role in the maritime sphere, based on its recognised expertise in the management of fisheries and marine and coastal environments and the preservation of biodiversity, as well as its leadership role in international conferences dealing with climate change, and the threats confronting island states and in the CGPCS (see below). Of particular importance in the operations of the IOC, is its Regional Maritime Security Programme (MASE), funded by the EU<sup>8</sup>, to provide a mechanism for sharing information and to coordinate actions at sea. Apart from the five IOC island member states, Kenya and Djibouti are also MASE signatories, indicating the potential for expansion of the IOC, and emphasising its core role in maritime security in the region.

In early 2020, Saudi Arabia launched the Red Sea Council<sup>9</sup>, a forum aimed at enhancing stability and cooperation on security issues in the region. The Council includes Egypt, Eritrea and Sudan as members, and its establishment was encouraged by the EU, led by Germany. Little is known about this organisation, apart from the fact that it focusses mainly on traditional security issues, rather than (also) developmental concerns, and it is clear that the war in Yemen is considered to be the most important factor generating instability in the Red Sea. Yet the inclusion of African states, especially from the Horn and East Africa, underscores the political linkages that span the Horn, North-East Africa and the Gulf states. The involvement of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in particular points to the deep power rivalries between these countries, on the one hand, and others who are increasingly involved in Africa, viz. Turkey, Iran and Qatar, and may be an indication of how parts of the continent are being turned into a theatre of great/regional power competition.

## Capacity building and coordination programmes

These programmes differ from the frameworks and institutions discussed in the previous section in that they are not institutionalised. The best known is the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), created in 2009 as a consensus-based grouping to coordinate international efforts to combat piracy along the Horn of Africa coastline. It was not created as a permanent institution, and over the past several years its plenaries were characterised by debates as to whether it still had a role to play, given the demise of piracy. In January 2022, the Group changed its name to the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.iora.int/en/flagship-projects/the-indian-ocean-dialogue>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.eecas.europa.eu/delegations/mauritius/maritime-security-maritime-security-architecture-can-only-function-fully-if\\_en](https://www.eecas.europa.eu/delegations/mauritius/maritime-security-maritime-security-architecture-can-only-function-fully-if_en)

<sup>9</sup> <https://africatimes.com/2020/01/21/crossing-the-red-sea-where-the-new-littoral-state-council-goes-next/>

(CGIMA)<sup>10</sup>, following a submission prepared by Seychelles as chair of the Group's Steering Working Group that proposed a new vision and mandate for the Group, arguing in particular that the rise in drug trafficking and IUU fishing in the region, coupled with fears of the spill-over effects of the insurgency in Northern Mozambique into the maritime domain, necessitated its continuation and an expansion of its mandate.

There is some concern, though, that the demise of piracy and a changed mandate would see the shipping industry exit the arrangement, as the new mandate does not represent their interests. It could be argued that the CGPCS/CGIMA is not sustainable as its original mandate has been fulfilled, and emerging maritime security issues do not align with the wide range of actors that came together in 2009. Though valuable lessons regarding capacity building and coordination could be learned from this experience. The Group, it could be argued, has run its course, and a range of other institutions and arrangements might be better suited at addressing new security threats. On the other hand, what would be lost with a winding down of the Group, is its convening capacity – the ability to provide a forum for diplomatic interaction on the part of an impressive range of actors, including what could be viewed as those playing a role in the increased militarisation of the region (including China), and across a wide range of maritime security issues in the Western Indian Ocean, a point returned to later in this paper.

Three other arrangements/partnerships that deserve mention, are the US-led Combined Maritime Taskforce (CMT), the EU's Operation ATALANTA, and the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction mechanism (SHADE), co-led by the CMT and the EU on the basis of its Coordinated Maritime Presences concept.<sup>11</sup> These three mechanisms/arrangements are focused on traditional maritime security concentrating on the maintenance and protection of safe and secure sea lines, largely in the North Western Indian Ocean, thereby justifying a continued military presence in the region. SHADE is at present an informal technical coordination mechanism, that, as is the case with the Contact Group, operates on a network principle that does not require formal institutionalisation (see Percy, 2016).<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, the UNDOC's Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime (IOFMC) deserves brief attention as it provides a platform within the UNDOC office in Nairobi to coordinate international cooperation efforts to support legislative reform and enhance maritime law enforcement capacity focusing on drug trafficking, fisheries crime, and maritime terrorism.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of the above discussion was to identify and scope out the range of security threats in the Western Indian Ocean and the various institutions and cooperative arrangements in existence or developed to address these threats. The growing militarisation of the region was also mentioned – on the one hand, as an almost unavoidable consequence of the way in which the fight against piracy was conceived of and responded to. What should be emphasised too, on the other hand, is the extent to which this militarisation is increasingly based on great power rivalry and specifically on the objective of countering China's growing presence and power projection across the Indian Ocean, as well as on, to some extent, the war

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<sup>10</sup> <https://safety4sea.com/uns-contact-group-on-somali-piracy-changes-mandate-as-piracy-off-somalia-is-virtually-non-existent/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2022-03-coordinated-maritime-presences-newlayout.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/jogss/article-abstract/1/4/270/2841132>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/piracy/Indian-Ocean.html>

in Yemen. A regularised activity that illustrates the outright geopolitical interests in this region is the Malabar Naval Exercises, conducted annually, having started as a bilateral activity between India and the US, but which has grown into a Quad exercise more recently. Whereas the exercise used to focus largely on the Eastern Indian Ocean in the past, it included, in 2020, a second phase in the Arabian Sea,<sup>14</sup> indicating the growing interest of the Quad in the Western Indian Ocean. In late 2021, India and the UK held their first ever joint naval exercise, Konkan-Shakti, focused on India's West coast. The exercise, though, did not include the littoral states of Africa.<sup>15</sup> It remains to be seen whether this will become a regular activity and whether it will focus on the broader Western Indian Ocean region.

Mention should also be made of the Information Fusion Centre of the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established by the government of India in 2018 and hosted by the Indian Navy. Created to 'further maritime safety and security'<sup>16</sup> on the principle of SAGAR (safety and security for all in the region), the Centre has as a main theme that of maritime domain awareness (MDA) around piracy and non-piracy issues, and includes in its membership not only the Quad nations, but also Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles.

Lastly, a scoping exercise to identify presence and involvement, would be incomplete without pointing to the fact that anti-piracy measures have, since 2008, provided a rationale for a number of actors to establish military bases in the Western Indian Ocean. The US, China, Japan, Italy and France (the latter including Spanish and German contingents) have military bases in Djibouti, Turkey has a base in Somalia<sup>17</sup>, Russia in Sudan, and the UAE in Eritrea<sup>18</sup>. India is building a military base on Mauritius' North Agalega island and the debate this has engendered in Africa is reminiscent of the contentious presence of the UK on the Chagos Archipelago (and the US military base in this territory).<sup>19</sup>

A number of observations are in order at this point of the discussion. Firstly, the Western Indian Ocean, and particularly so the North Western region and the island states, is a crowded space as far as activities and institutions (whether formal or as informal forums) are concerned. Kenya is increasingly involved in various forums and arrangements, but although South Africa is generally considered to be the 'powerhouse' of the region, also as far as its naval capabilities are concerned, it does not play any major or even much of a discernible role in any of the arrangements covered in this section. This may change should international attention shift towards the South of the WIO, especially given the evolving situation in northern Mozambique, and given the fact that South Africa finds itself on both the Indian and Atlantic oceans, overseeing, as it were, the Cape sea route.

Secondly, the density of actors involved in the Western Indian Ocean has led some observers (see Bueger and Stockbruegger, 2022) to call for the development of an overarching maritime architecture for the region, something also mentioned in the 2050 AIMS. Bueger and Stockbruegger's call is based on the growing militarisation of the region, and these two

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<sup>14</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/malabar-exercise-of-quad-nations-why-it-matters-to-india-7472058/>

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/uks-largest-warship-its-strike-group-enter-indian-ocean-for-wargame-2488100>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/ifc-ior/about-us.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/1/turkey-sets-up-largest-overseas-army-base-in-somalia>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theafricareport.com/49957/ports-military-bases-and-treaties-whos-who-in-the-red-sea/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://channel16.dryadglobal.com/indian-military-base-in-mauritius-why-africa-should-worry>

authors are of the opinion that the CGPCS/CGIMA arrangement and SHADE (both discussed earlier), offer the best model or template for such an architecture. The AU's mention of a maritime architecture is based on a much broader definition of security to include non-traditional elements and the blue economy, and covering the whole continent, thereby including also its western seaboard (Atlantic Ocean) and inland waters. In essence, talk of a maritime security architecture for the Western Indian Ocean is inherently a political question, touching on crucial issues such as sovereignty, and who defines security – this part of the Indian Ocean might face huge traditional and non-traditional threats and vulnerabilities, but there is a fear that formalisation and institutionalisation might reinforce the growing perception that the continent is yet again, as during the Cold War, being turned into an object of geopolitical rivalries, without having much agency in determining outcomes.

Thirdly, the evolution of the Indo-Pacific as a construct representing very specific power configurations, will further impact this region. Several major powers, in their Indo-Pacific strategies (the UK and EU) mention the Western Indo-Pacific; India insists on an inclusive approach that would make the Western Indian Ocean a fully integrated part of the development of an 'Indo-Pacific region'<sup>20</sup>, but the US's Indo-Pacific strategy does not include the Western Indian Ocean region.

## Themes

What emerges from this audit of African interests in the Western Indian Ocean are three core themes. First, there are a host of non-traditional security threats, including radical Islamists like Al-Shabbab operating in Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as extensive transnational criminal organisations engaged in illegal trade in resources, narcotics and human trafficking. Second, there are a set of development imperatives centred around the blue economy and maritime resources – including offshore natural gas and fisheries – coupled with the financing and upgrading of port, transportation and communication infrastructure, as well as a range of societal improvements. Third, there is a palpable concern that the growing evidence of great power competition, for instance the expansion of military bases and presence, may interfere with – or even be seen as threatening to – the fulfilment of African development aspirations as well as impacting its position on regional security.

In light of these three thematic areas of African interest and concern towards the Western Indian Ocean, the next section will explore what avenues of cooperation might be pursued by the UK and India in the region and, especially, in conjunction with African interests.

## Prospects for UK-India Cooperation in the Western Indian Ocean

The scope for cooperation between the UK and India in the Western Indian Ocean is multi-faceted, being in the general areas of development assistance and encouraging commercial engagement to the specificities of capacity building in local security and joint naval coordination.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-commits-to-a-free-open-and-inclusive-indo-pacific-region/articleshow/91742054.cms>



The UK-India joint statement<sup>21</sup> following Boris Johnson's visit to India in April 2022 provides a framework within which cooperation with a view to 'fighting more than pirates' could be structured and implemented.

The various areas identified for cooperation towards a 'Vision 2047', align neatly with the security and developmental concerns of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, covering as it does, trade, defence and security, climate and clean energy, health, and regional and multilateral cooperation. What is crucial to any sustained engagement in the region is the need to develop these joint initiatives in partnership with African counterparts at the regional level and through bilateral interaction. Such a longer-term approach would involve the following dimensions: a careful reading of the African regional positioning on the Western Indian Ocean, a pro-active alignment with the underlying aims that feature at that level, and the identification and active engagement with key bilateral African partners who have demonstrated commitments and capabilities to build working relationships in the region.

Understanding the African positions as articulated by regional organisations such as the African Union needs to be followed by concrete efforts to engage with African counterparts in government and elements of civil society. The opening of a regional dialogue process – track 1.5 or 2.0 – could be a point of departure for basic understanding of common ground and points of difference. For instance, the centrality of African interests in the Western Indian Ocean is first and foremost on development issues and that needs to be acknowledged by the UK and India. At the same time, that development imperative is increasingly matched by a range of security concerns. Again, how these overlap – for instance, the persistent violation of the Exclusive Economic Zones of African and Indian Ocean island states by illegal trawlers, has a direct impact on local fishing communities and is a by-product of the under-investment in coast guard/naval capacity – underscores the linkages between development and security. Bolstering security in these cases has a demonstrated effect on development prospects and should be seen that way by Africans and partners.

Concurrently, tacitly acknowledging that other great powers operate in the region and are held in relatively positive terms due to their development and diplomatic activism in sectors like infrastructure, resources and health, is important. Self-confidence in UK-India collaboration with African partners to provide better quality, more transparent and sustainable outcomes than, for instance, China or Russia who might be operating in the same sectors, should be the core messaging that accompanies any outreach to Africa.

Having identified the declared African perspective and the set of formal positions articulated by African regional organisations and treaty obligations, bringing UK and India's resources to bear in a way that addresses Africa's development imperative and security concerns alongside UK and Indian interests in the Western Indian Ocean. Existing institutions or organisations certainly are important points of contact and must feature in the outreach in this area. Notably, even while they are likely to have limited scope and capacity to act as regional partners in the delivery of substantive development and security in specific areas, they can nonetheless serve as important sources of broad legitimacy for the UK and India's involvement in the region and sectors.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prime-minister-boris-johnsons-visit-to-india-april-2022-uk-india-joint-statements/uk-india-joint-statement-april-2022-towards-shared-security-and-prosperity-through-national-resilience>

At the same time, the significance of engaging directly with key regional states through bilateral – or, with UK and India collaborating, more accurately trilateral – forms of cooperation would be crucial to realising constructive gains and impacts in fulfilling ambitious plans for capacity building in development and security. Such trilateral cooperation will provide the institutional framework for cooperation and delivery of development assistance in specific sectors and programmes aimed at enhancing of local capacities. The demonstration effect of such trilateral programmes in delivering improvements to local livelihoods in coastal regions and strengthening security management will produce a virtuous cycle which will attract further interest from countries in the region.

In short, the UK and India could position themselves as leaders in addressing these twin African concerns in their approach through their development and security programming in the region. An inclusive dialogue process with African partners would do much to build confidence in the level and further the content of commitment from the two powers. Moving in step with African partners, the substance of engagement could evolve from broad principles to the practicalities of trilateral cooperation much more rapidly than one might expect. All of these recommendations assume, of course, that there are sufficient points of convergence between London and New Delhi to allow for close collaboration at a policy level towards the Western Indian Ocean and in the context of programme design and delivery. The recent bilateral leaders' discussions in New Delhi in April and subsequent public statements augur well for closer cooperation over the Western Indian Ocean.

# Cooperation not Competition – Deterring Chinese Aggression in the Western Indian Ocean

**Vice Admiral Anil Kumar Chawla, PVSM, AVSM, NM, VSM (Retd.)**

## Abstract

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) comprises an important distinct sub-region of the Indo-Pacific which has received close attention from China over the past two decades due to its geo-strategic and economic interests in the region, which has intensified after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015. The US, and the West, has largely ignored the geopolitical significance of WIO, especially after the US exit from Iraq and Afghanistan. India, being the predominant resident power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), has an immense individual stake in the region's stability and security. Because of its democratic credentials and the capability of its maritime forces, it is looked upon by IOR littorals as a reliable and preferred maritime security provider in the region. However, due to the unprecedented levels of investment and naval force levels put in by China in the IOR in general, and the WIO in particular, there is a need for like-minded democracies, such as India and the United Kingdom, to work together towards common goals – a rules-based international order, democracy, stability and security in the region to ensure its prosperity and preserve its way of life. This essay first examines the geographical extent and strategic importance of the WIO, and identifies the multi-dimensional security threats that it faces. It then assesses the geo-strategic interests of China in the WIO, maps the recent increase in its economic and military footprint in the region, and identifies key areas where China could present a challenge. Finally, it recommends measures to mitigate the inroads made by China, which need to be pursued with vigour.

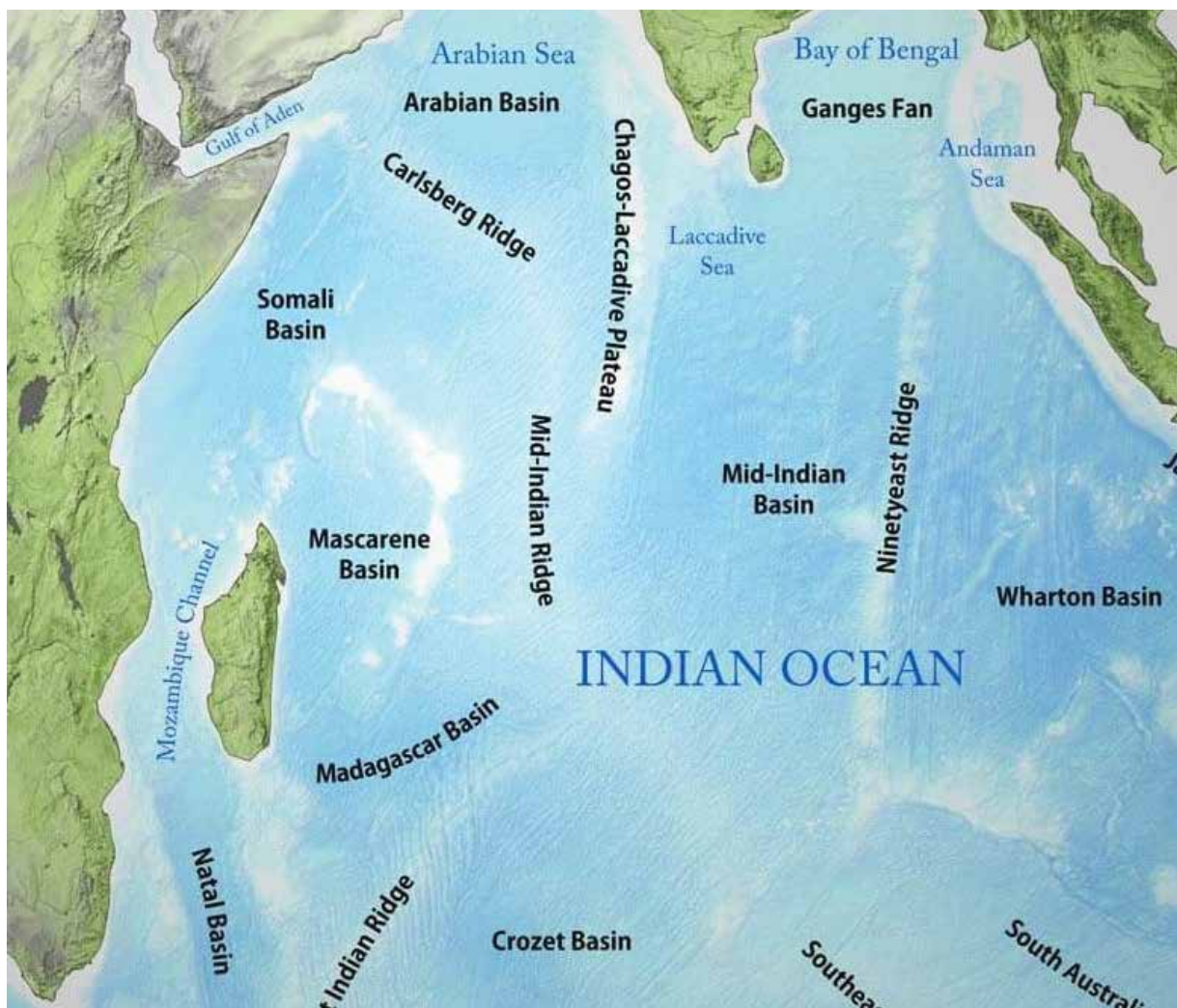
## Introduction

China is driven by a deep sense of historical grievance, exemplified by the Communist Party of China's (CPC) trope of the so-called 'century of humiliation', a period of Western and Japanese imperialism, imposed on them commencing with the First Opium War in 1839, which apparently ended when Communist China came into being as an independent entity under Mao Zedong in 1949. China's leaders have held a long-standing ambition, articulated clearly by Xi Jinping after taking over as General Secretary of Communist Party of China (CPC) in late 2012, of a resurgent China that would rightfully reclaim its place at the apex of the global hierarchy. The so-called 'Chinese Dream' to attain the status of being the pre-eminent global power also has a timeline – 2049 – the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC)<sup>1</sup>. Over the past decade, China's publicly articulated stance of a 'peaceful rise' has given way to a more aggressive and nationalistic approach in its quest to attain national-strategic goals within its stipulated timelines.

China's Grand Strategy to replace the United States (US) as the world's leading power has detailed sub-strategies in almost every sphere of human endeavour. This includes a specific strategy to develop relations with the continent of Africa, which is primarily seen as a source of raw materials and a market for Chinese goods and services, besides being the location of future overseas military bases. This essay examines Chinese geo-strategic and economic interests in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region and identifies the key areas where China could present a challenge, as also recommendations that could possibly counter this challenge.

## The Western Indian Ocean Region

The WIO stretches from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of India, including all islands and littorals that fall within it and at its fringes, comprising a surface oceanic area of over 30 million km<sup>2</sup>, equivalent to 8.1% of the global ocean surface, with exclusive economic zones (EEZs) covering over 6 million km<sup>2</sup> and a combined coastline of over 15,000km<sup>2</sup>. The eleven countries in the WIO are a combination of continental and small island states including: Comoros, French Indian Ocean territories, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania. Almost all countries in the WIO are in the 'developing' category, and include a failed state – Somalia. India is the largest country in the WIO and dominates the area due to its size, location, and economic heft.



Map of the Western Indian Ocean Region<sup>3</sup>

The region has historically been politically and ethnically fragmented, best illustrated by the division of Africa between European colonial powers after the Berlin Conference (1894-95) – with Kenya, Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka (and India) being British colonies; Mozambique with Portugal; Madagascar and Comoros with France; Tanzania with Germany; and Somalia with Italy. Having different languages, ethnic backgrounds and cultures, if there is a common factor, it is the quintessential maritime nature of this region, which impacts every key issue, whether it is livelihood, energy, trade, or security. Coastal and offshore resources and maritime trade are the principal means of livelihood for most countries in the region. For most countries also, security threats can only come over the seas.

A scan of the Western Indian Ocean littoral shows, that with the exception of a few countries, all the others are afflicted with one or more of the ailments of poverty, backwardness, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, or internal insurgency. India, being the predominant resident power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), has an immense individual stake in its stability and security. Because of its democratic credentials and adherence to a rules-based world order, as also the capability and credibility of its maritime forces, it is looked upon by other littorals as a reliable and preferred maritime security provider and partner in the region. However, due to the unprecedented levels of investment and naval force levels put in by China in the IOR in general, and the WIO in particular, over the past two decades, there is a need for like-minded democracies including India, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Japan, and Australia to work together to ensure freedom of the global commons, the rule of law, democracy, stability and security in the region.

## The Strategic Importance of the WIO

The strategic importance of IOR stems from the fact, that apart from its indigenous mineral and non-mineral wealth, it is a critical thoroughway for transportation of energy products, commodities and finished goods between the manufacturing hubs in East, Southeast and South Asia, and their markets in the west coast of the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle-East. As per UNCTAD figures, around 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value, worth an estimated USD 28.5 trillion, was carried by sea in 2021<sup>4</sup>, reflecting the dependence of nations on the seas. Of this, over 80% of the world's maritime oil trade<sup>5</sup> and over 60% of all global trade transits through the waters of the Indian Ocean<sup>6</sup>. In 2020, over 145,000 ships operated in, or through the Indian Ocean<sup>7</sup>, transporting oil and other raw materials, consumer goods, food, and electronic products. The geography of the Indian Ocean dictates that access to the ocean is possible only through a number of choke points, principal among them being the Cape of Good Hope, the Suez Canal, the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, and the straits of Malacca and Sunda. Two of these choke points lie within the WIO – the Cape of Good Hope and the Bab-el-Mandeb. It is not inconceivable for malign state and non-state actors to block or disrupt these choke points, thereby adversely impacting energy security and economic well-being across the globe.

Being a relatively young ocean (the Indian Ocean basin is only 80 million years old), the WIO and its littorals house a treasure trove of mineral and living resources, many of which remain untapped. Prominent reserves of minerals on the Indian Ocean seabed include manganese, ilmenite, tin, monazite (a rare earth), zircon and chromite. It is, therefore, not surprising that Chinese research and survey ships have been monitored operating frequently in the region. Most WIO littoral states, however, continue to remain exporters of raw materials and importers of finished goods. The Indian Ocean is also a rich trove of living resources and provides almost 30% of global maritime catches<sup>8</sup>. The fisheries sector is also a major employer, but 90% of the fishermen in the IOR are engaged in artisanal fishing<sup>9</sup>, with most commercial deep-sea fishing being done by extra-regional countries, such as China and Taiwan, which has been a major reason for the rise of piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

In addition, the WIO is also an important hub of ocean tourism, particularly for island states such as Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles, for whom the sector is a major contributor to their GDP.

With the emergence of the concept of the 'Blue Economy' and the dependence of WIO littorals on the ocean for their prosperity and well-being, the sustainable exploitation of the Indian Ocean's untapped potential requires a stable, secure and law-abiding littoral, which can only be guaranteed by maritime forces working in concert. Most IOR littorals, therefore, require both capability and capacity-building to realise the potential of their Blue Economy. It is this void that China seeks to fill, with the ultimate goal of becoming the predominant political, financial, and security partner of countries in the region.

## Security Threats to the WIO

Because of its strategic importance, it is not surprising that the WIO has a number of security threats, some generic, and others specific to the region, which is examined in this section.

Having been dominated by colonial powers from the 16th century to the mid-20th century, the WIO has a number of unresolved land and maritime boundary disputes, most of which are a legacy of its colonial past. Due to a variety of reasons, most of the major conflicts since the end of the Cold War have taken place in or around the IOR. Currently, two of these conflicts, the ongoing civil wars in Yemen and Somalia, have spilt into the maritime domain. Over a period of time, extremist fundamentalist organisations, first the Al Qaeda and most recently the Islamic State (IS), as also their affiliates/off-shoots such as Al-Shabaab, have been involved in both conflicts, further complicating their resolution. International fatigue for direct involvement in these long-standing conflicts have allowed them to fester, with consequentially adverse impact on human security in these countries, as also overall security in the region, especially maritime security.

In this context, the scourge of modern-day piracy—which emerged in the Gulf of Aden from the failed state of Somalia in the late 1990s and by 2010, had spread across a large part of the WIO—merits special mention. The employment of a multinational naval task force, and the independent deployment of several other navies to the Gulf of Aden, brought the menace under control by 2015. The Indian Navy, being the largest resident navy in the IOR, played a key role in anti-piracy operations, with one ship being constantly deployed in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. In response to these conflicts and tensions, as also the ongoing anti-piracy patrols, almost 125 warships<sup>10</sup> from navies across the globe remain deployed in the northern Indian Ocean at any given time of the year. China has used the pretext of anti-piracy deployment in the Gulf of Aden to strengthen its presence in the WIO through regular deployment of a flotilla of advanced ships and submarines, as also the acquisition of a military base in Djibouti.

Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism too have raised their ugly head in the region over the past two decades, stemming from the long-running conflicts in the Middle-East and Afghanistan, aided and abetted by some states such as Pakistan. These threats have a maritime manifestation, as unfortunately seen in the 26/11 attacks carried out by Pakistan-backed terrorists in Mumbai in 2008. This Low Intensity Maritime Conflict waged by non-state entities, conjoined with other global menaces, such as drug trafficking, gun-running and people trafficking, is an evil alliance that infests the world. In recent years, the seizure of various types of drugs originating from the Golden Crescent, which are mainly transported to markets across the globe by sea, has been on the increase, with over 400 seizures of varying quantities reported in 2020<sup>11</sup>. Drugs worth USD 189 million were seized by CTF 150 in 2021 alone<sup>12</sup>, largely originating from the Makran coast.

If to this are added the figures of drug seizures by the Indian Navy, Coast Guard and other Indian maritime agencies, which amounted to almost INR 28,000 Crore (equivalent to over USD 3.5 billion) in 2021<sup>13</sup>, and if it is estimated that only a fraction of the drugs trafficked are apprehended, the extent of the problem can be gauged. It has also been estimated by India's Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) that over 70% of the total drug trafficking is being conducted through maritime routes<sup>14</sup>, in which the littoral countries of the WIO play an inadvertent role.

Unfortunately, the IOR is also the locus of a large number of natural disasters, and is sometimes termed as the 'World's Hazard Belt', being susceptible to Climatological (cyclones and droughts), Geological and Tectonic (earthquakes and tsunamis), and Hydrological (floods and tidal surges) disasters<sup>15</sup>. The WIO is particularly susceptible to cyclones, with Mauritius, Madagascar and Mozambique being the most frequently affected countries in the region. The IOR littorals are also heavily dependent for water on the annual monsoon winds, and their disruption or delay due to climatological factors can have a devastating impact on the daily life of millions of people residing in littoral countries, as illustrated by the frequent episodes of floods and droughts, especially in the Horn of Africa.

Global warming is calculated to be impacting the Indian Ocean three times more than the Pacific Ocean, with the Indian Ocean rising by an average of 3.7 mm every year. Global warming is resulting in more intense and unseasonal rainfall and rising sea levels are already displacing thousands of people living in oceanic delta regions, with the potential to create millions of 'climate refugees' by 2050<sup>16</sup> in the region, if the rise in sea levels is unchecked. Climate change, therefore, is emerging as one of the biggest threats to IOR security<sup>17</sup>.

Another looming menace that requires coordinated action, not just by the IOR, but the entire globe, is oceanic pollution and over-exploitation of oceanic resources. Since times immemorial, the oceans have been seen as a limitless resource, but unsustainable fishing practices on the high seas and massive dumping of plastics and other pollutants in the oceans has adversely impacted marine life in the oceans. In 2017 it was reported that of 441 stocks, 47% were fully exploited, 18% were over-exploited, 9% were depleted and 1% was recovering<sup>18</sup>. Since the oceans are global commons, concerted global action is required to check pollution, clean up the oceans and revive these biospheres critical to human existence.

The emergence of China as a new maritime global power is a fresh cause for concern, especially in the IOR. While every nation is entitled to maintain forces for its defence, the current international unease stems from the opacity of China's intentions and the unprecedented build-up of the PLA Navy (PLAN). The PLAN's extensive deployment in the IOR and beyond, under the guise of anti-piracy patrols; as also the aggression displayed by China in the South China Sea to usurp islets and reefs, and subsequently restrict freedom of movement in its waters, displays a contempt for a rules-based international order and China's belief that 'might is right'. Today, the PLAN outmatches every regional navy in Asia, and in the past few years, has surpassed the US Navy in total numbers of major combatants. Indeed, by the end of 2020, the PLAN had 360 surface combatants, as compared to the US Navy's 297; predicted to grow to 400 major combatants by 2025; and 425 by 2030<sup>19</sup>. The US itself acknowledges that the PLAN poses a major challenge to their ability to maintain wartime sea control in ocean areas of the Western Pacific – the first such challenge posed to the US Navy since the end of the Cold War<sup>20</sup>, which could be replicated in the IOR in the decades ahead, if we do not move to counter it decisively.

## China's Strategic Interests in the WIO

The decade commencing 2020 was to have rung in significant achievements for the PRC and Xi Jinping, with the CCP celebrating its centenary in 2021, China hosting the Winter Olympics in February 2022, and the likely extension of President Xi Jinping's tenure in 2022. But things have not entirely gone China's way. The Covid-19 pandemic, which originated in Wuhan in China, has caused global outrage, with China attempting to deflect the blame for its spread to other countries. The re-emergence of the Omicron variant in China in 2022 and its senseless 'zero Covid' policy has disrupted global supply chains and adversely affected China's economy, besides causing internal unrest. Violation of the 'one-country two-systems' agreement over Hong Kong and China's wolf-warrior diplomacy, especially in Southeast Asia and with Australia, has stirred global unease. China's transgression of border agreements with India has seriously affected relations between the two nuclear capable countries. It has also used the Covid pandemic to expand even more aggressively in the South China Sea, thereby demonstrating its 'might is right' policy. The ongoing trade war with the US has intensified, and its technological expansion in niche areas such as 5G has been stymied across the globe. The progress of the BRI too has slowed down due to the growing unease over its predatory lending policies, exemplified by the economic crises in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as also the Ukraine conflict, which has blocked the progress and use of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the landward leg of the BRI, which was to connect China to Europe through Russia.

However, everything has not gone against China. Despite the global economic slowdown, it is still growing at a reasonable pace, and in fact recorded a GDP growth rate of 8.1% in 2021, in a rebound from the 'Covid GDP growth' in 2020, which at 2.24% was still better than most other major economies<sup>21</sup>. It is also well on its path of strengthening its military and becoming a challenger to the global dominance of the US. It has framed a close 'no limits' partnership with Russia in February 2022, further cementing its continental security and thereby allowing it to continue to concentrate its attention on its quest for domination of the seas. As far as the WIO is concerned, the region has continued to receive close attention from China due to its economic and strategic interests, which are discussed subsequently.

## WIO – Key Source of Raw Materials and Market for Chinese Products

The WIO is a key source and access route to Africa's natural resources, and an important market for Chinese exports. China is dependent on Africa for imports of fossil fuels and commodities constituting critical inputs in emerging technology products. Beijing has increased its control of African commodities through strategic direct investment in oil fields, mines, and production facilities, as well as through resource-backed loans that call for in-kind payments of commodities<sup>22</sup>. This investment has grown substantially due to the growing need for minerals by China's manufacturing sector. In the WIO, this includes the import of antimony, bauxite, chromite, cobalt, copper, manganese, nickel, platinum, titanium, gold, tantalum and vanadium from South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zambia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. China-Africa trade has grown exponentially after the launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. In 2021, China was Africa's largest trading partner, with exports to the continent amounting to USD 254.3 billion and imports amounting to only USD 105.9 billion, mainly from South Africa, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia<sup>23</sup>.



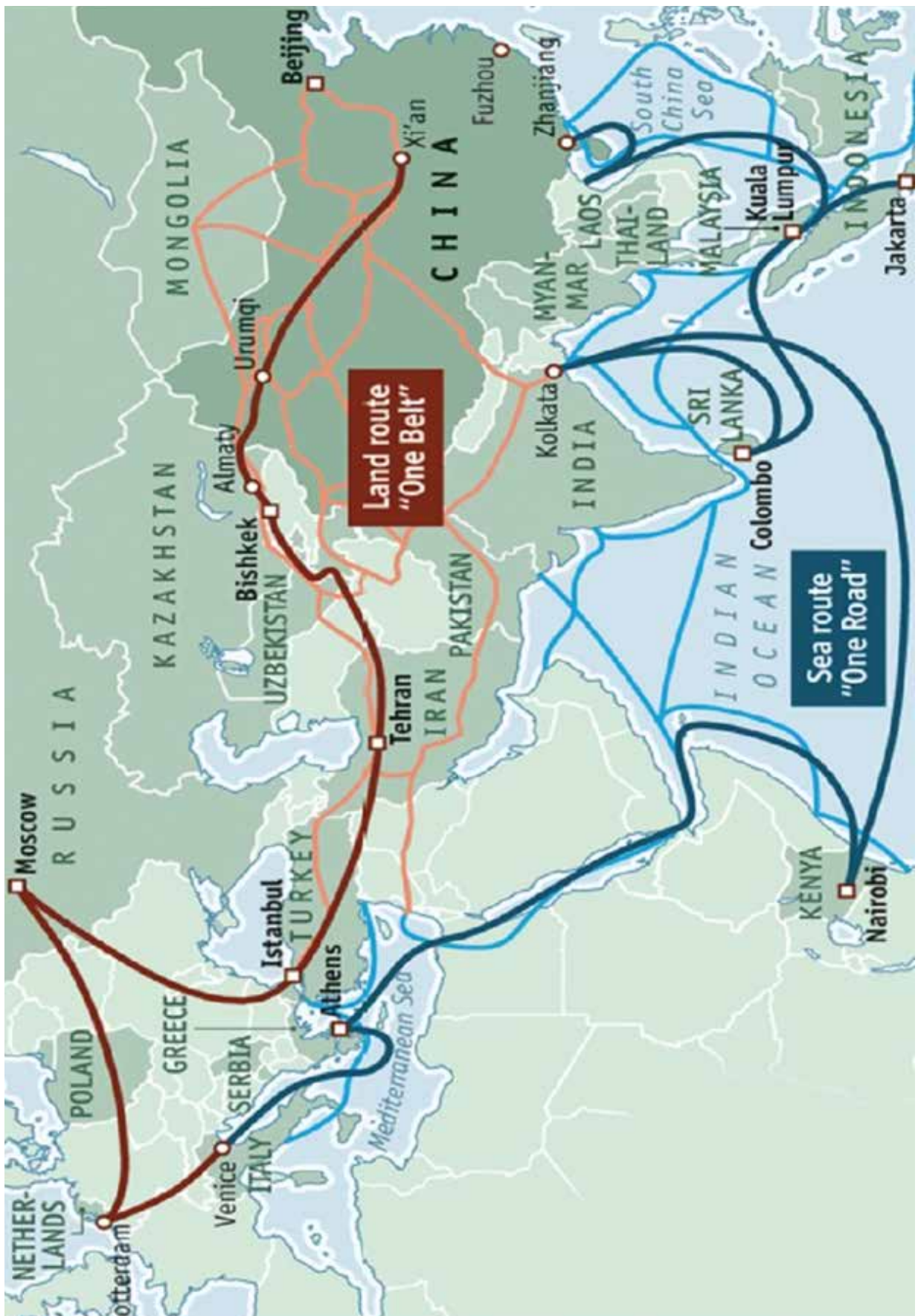
Recent reports indicate that China has announced plans to invest over USD 300 billion in Africa to help it close the trade deficit with China, but could end up exacerbating it further<sup>24</sup>.

## Export of the Chinese Model of Governance and Standards

The continent of Africa has been central to China's efforts to increase its influence and popularise its authoritarian model across the world. China tailors its approach to different African countries with the goal of instilling admiration and at times emulation of China's alternative political and governance regime in order to enlist their support for Chinese diplomatic priorities on and beyond the continent<sup>25</sup>. These efforts have gained prominence after Xi Jinping became China's supreme leader in 2012. Since then, China has launched new initiatives to transform Africa into a testing ground for the export of its governance system of state-led economic growth under one-party, authoritarian rule. Export of China's IT, telecom technologies and power supply systems in African countries is connected to its political and geo-strategic goals. Through these technologies, Beijing has tried to export tools of political repression to its neighbourhood, such as surveillance systems and impose censorship on the internet and the media, and in some cases, also gain access to sensitive information and data<sup>26</sup>. These efforts have gained momentum as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, China's actions have also stirred unease in several democracies in the WIO and the recent democratic change of government in the Maldives is a classic case of souring of the 'Chinese model'.

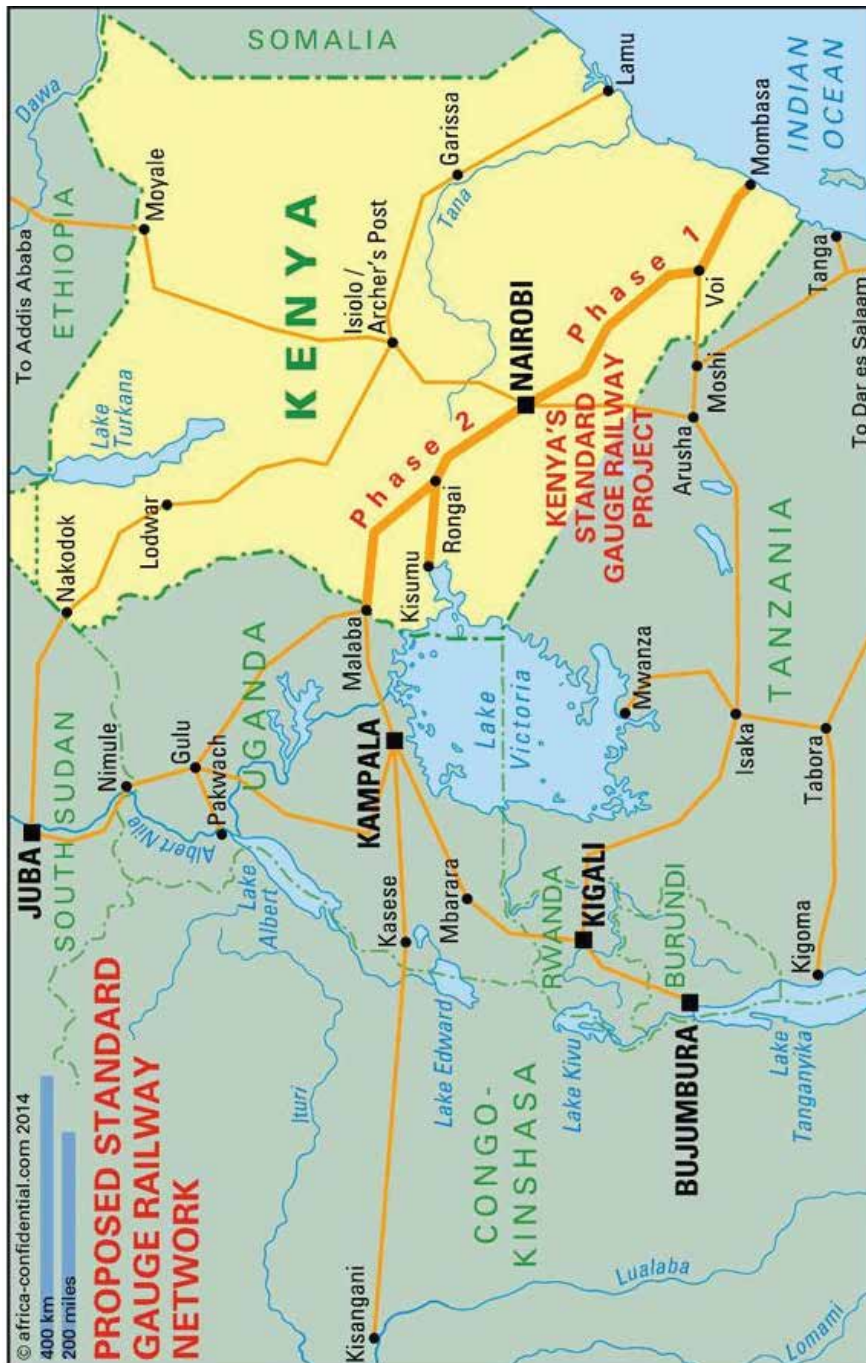
## The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its Impact on the WIO

The apprehension that China's maritime strategy aims to not only build up its military power, but more importantly, use that power to secure resources, trade routes, export markets and overseas bases for the realisation of the 'Chinese Dream', is exemplified by China's BRI. The maritime section of the BRI initiative has its origins in China's anxiety over its 'Malacca Dilemma'. Being overly dependent on access to energy supplies and export markets through the choke-points of the Indian Ocean, China commenced building maritime infrastructure and overland oil pipelines along its major sea lines of communication in the IOR at the turn of the 21st century. This was transformed into a mammoth blueprint for construction of infrastructure, harbours, roads, power plants, SEZs, etc., the final design of which was released in the form of the BRI on 28 March 2015. As a result, China is the largest investor in infrastructure projects in Africa today, with investments of USD 23 billion between 2007 and 2020<sup>27</sup>. In the WIO, China has made major infrastructure investments in Kenya, Tanzania and Maldives. However, China's financing of projects is opaque and often comes with onerous terms, leading to rising concerns of economic exploitation, dependency and political coercion. Many WIO countries borrowing from Beijing face growing debt burdens – Sri Lanka and Djibouti being cases in point.



China's official map of the Belt and Road initiative<sup>28</sup>

China has a long history of infrastructure development in East Africa, commencing with the Tazara Railway project in 1975, which linked Zambia's copper mines to Tanzania. Since then, China has become the largest financier of infrastructure projects in Africa, with projects such as the Bagamoyo port in Tanzania, which provides it with access to tap an estimated USD 24 trillion of mineral wealth in the hinterland, especially from the Democratic Republic of Congo. It has also invested in the Addis Ababa-Djibouti and Kenya Broad Gauge railway projects with their maritime outlets at Djibouti and Mombasa ports respectively. However, both projects are struggling to make a profit and loan repayment to Chinese banks has been difficult for both countries<sup>29</sup>.



Map of Kenya's Standard Gauge project being built by China<sup>30</sup>

While China has strenuously insisted that the BRI is solely about economic cooperation and does not have any military component, it had said much the same about the reclaimed islands in the South China Sea, which have now been militarised. Thus, despite assurances by China, there is deep global suspicion that the BRI is a Trojan horse for China's strategic military ambitions, which will not only support its economic growth, but also provide it leverage to obtain military bases, particularly from weak and indebted countries along the BRI. This is bolstered by the fact that several BRI port projects, such as Gwadar and Hambantota, located in strategic proximity to vital sea lanes and maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific, do not appear to be driven by commercial logic<sup>31</sup>. China's 2019 Defence White Paper has also included 'protection of China's overseas interests' as a new mission for the PLA. This has been justified by the fact that China's overseas investments and properties now roughly amount to USD 7 trillion, with over 5.5 million Chinese citizens living overseas<sup>32</sup>, which are set to grow exponentially with the BRI.

## China's Security Interests in the WIO

China has a long-standing defence relationship with a few WIO countries, most notably Tanzania and Mozambique, where it has been a major arms supplier and supporter since the 1960s. In 2020, China supplied over 19.1% of all weapons imported by Africa<sup>33</sup>, with WIO countries such as Mozambique, Seychelles, and Tanzania receiving more than 90% of their arms from China<sup>34</sup>. With its enhanced presence in the WIO because of the BRI, China's involvement in arms sales is also likely to grow. Notably, China has a broader approach to security engagement with African countries, in which it uses its security engagement to buttress its economic interests and vice versa. China has also shown an apparent willingness to leverage its influence in the UN peacekeeping operations to advance its economic interests in African countries, raising the possibility that Beijing is subverting UN norms and procedures in the process<sup>35</sup>. As Beijing's economic and political influence on the continent grows, it could leverage its security ties to establish another base in the region in the medium to long term, as it has done in Djibouti.

## Gateway to the Mediterranean and Europe

Finally, a major reason for China's investment in the WIO and the Gulf of Aden relates to the fact that it sees the region as its gateway to the Mediterranean and Europe. The book, *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), published by China's Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), articulated a 'Two-Ocean Strategy' for the establishment of a Chinese 'arc-shaped strategic zone that would encompass the western Pacific Ocean and the northern Indian Ocean, reminiscent of the reach of the 16th Century Ming China. While termed as the 'Two-Oceans region' it was described as 'mainly including the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, as well as the littoral regions of neighbouring Asia, Africa, Oceania, North America, South America and Antarctica, spanning 50% of the globe and 71% of the global ocean area. The document deemed the region extremely important for China's security interests, representing 'a crucial area in influencing China's strategic development and security in the future, as well as the intermediate zone of our entrance into the Mediterranean Sea and Arctic region'<sup>36</sup>. It went on to state that because of the globalising nature of China's activities, its 'national interests will surpass greatly the traditional territorial land, sea and air scope, while the Two-Oceans region will become the most important platform and medium'. On this basis it wanted 'Chinese actors to create conditions to 'establish ourselves in the Two-Oceans region, participate in resource extraction and space utilisation of the oceans, and boost development in the two Polar Regions'. The document expected traditional and non-traditional security threats to accompany this sweeping geostrategic expansion<sup>37</sup>. This, in turn, offers a rationale for further concerted qualitative and quantitative development of the PLAN for years to come<sup>38</sup>.

## China's Increasing Military Footprint in the Indian Ocean

The 21st century saw the beginnings of a sea change in China's maritime strategy from 'near seas defence' to 'far seas operations' with the long-term aim of achieving 'command of the seas'. In consonance with this change in strategy, the pace and scope of PLAN's transformation also quickened, fuelled by foreign acquisitions of advanced weapon systems, focused efforts at indigenous development of weapons, sensors and platforms and far-reaching doctrinal and organisational reform of its armed forces. The commissioning of China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning in 2012, as also the construction of modern destroyers, frigates and submarines (both conventional and nuclear) indicated that the building blocks of a potent and modern blue water navy were being put in place. The decade and a half from 2005 to 2020 has seen unprecedented acceleration of the PLAN's blue water capabilities, and it has added 144 major modern combatants to its order of battle since 2005 – a speed which has been unprecedented in naval history since the end of the Second World War.

China's doctrinal construct for the use of its blue water assets was also formulated in parallel. China's 2015 Defence White Paper announced a subtle change in their maritime strategy, stating that: 'in line with the strategic requirement of 'offshore water defence' and 'open seas protection', the PLAN would gradually shift its focus from "offshore waters defence" to the combination of "offshore waters defence" with "open seas protection", and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure'<sup>39</sup>.

China's 2015 Defence White Paper identified the specific maritime tasks of the PLAN, inter alia, as: protection of national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests; security of its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and overseas interests; and, participation in international maritime cooperation so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power. The growing external maritime military activity of the PLAN coincided with President Xi Jinping's unveiling the broad policy framework and principles of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) in Hainan 28 March 2015<sup>40</sup>. This policy was also reflected in the unexpectedly robust maritime content of the 13th Five Year Plan (2016-20), which declared that China will, among other things, build itself into a 'maritime power', create a highly effective system for protecting overseas interests and safeguarding the legitimate overseas rights and interests of overseas Chinese citizens and legal persons, and actively promote the construction of 'strategic strong points' (euphemism for ports and associated economic infrastructure such as industrial parks and special economic zones), for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road<sup>41</sup>. The WIO is, of course, an integral part of the BRI initiative.

The emergence of an integrated set of Belt and Road-related initiatives combining dual-use infrastructure, Smart Ports and Cities, and space and digital systems, bolsters China's technological, economic, political and security interests and affords it increased rule-setting power. All these will contribute to building an ecosystem that serves to magnify Beijing's influence well beyond the economic sphere and achieving China's aim of decreasing the influence US and other major powers have in the Indo-Pacific region, such as India and Japan. It is worth noting that in 2014, Xi had called for the creation of a new regional security order in the Asia-Pacific and denounced the US-led alliance structure as anachronistic and no longer conducive to maintaining common security<sup>42</sup>.

In subsequent years, concrete evidence of China's growing military influence in the Indo-Pacific region has been evident. China's participation in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden 2008 onwards have not only enhanced the PLAN's operational capability, but also enabled exponential growth in their port calls across the globe, with PLAN ships having visited every continent in the world, several times to show their flag. These port calls, along with several deployments of the PLAN's hospital ship, Peace Ark, and HADR missions in Yemen, Southeast Asia, Maldives and Africa have projected its 'Blue Soft Power'<sup>43</sup> and burnished its image as a responsible nation with a professional navy. It would come as no surprise that the ports most frequently visited by Chinese naval ships include Djibouti, Mombasa, Dar-e-Salaam, Male and Port Victoria, all in the WIO. China's distant naval operations have received a boost after the commissioning of its first military based in Djibouti (in the WIO) in Aug 2017. The PLA's participation in joint exercises has also increased eight-fold between 2013 and 2016, including exercises with WIO countries. China's arms exports have grown 275% since 2000, with China becoming the largest arms supplier to Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Cambodia<sup>44</sup>. The PLA's role in training foreign officers has also grown exponentially. As of 2016, more than 4,000 military personnel from more than 130 countries have studied in Chinese military educational institutions<sup>45</sup>.

China's increased military activities in the Indo-Pacific fit in with its larger strategy of enhancing its presence and influence in the region. If not countered, this will eventually restrict the ability of other powers, including the US to act with freedom in the Indo-Pacific. Should Beijing be successful in leveraging BRI as a hegemonic device, peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific could be compromised.

## Countering China's Inroads in the WIO

It is evident that combating China's unilateral Grand Strategic vision requires an equally broad-based response. While the response will necessarily have to be multi-lateral, which very often suffers from the disadvantages of lack of coherence due to individual national pulls and pressures, smaller groups or coalitions can be effective if individual strengths are synergised. Maritime power is also expensive and not within the reach of everyone, and yet national sovereignty is sacrosanct. It is India's experience that smaller nations in the IOR look towards larger powers, such as India, for help and support to safeguard their interests. India's democratic credentials, its commitment to the rule of law, its close diplomatic relations with almost all countries in the region, and its ancient philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family), makes the Indian Navy a trusted and reliable ally and a preferred maritime security partner. The final section of this essay discusses the areas in which India and its international security partners, including the UK, can work together in engaging the WIO countries.

Both the UK and India have a substantial history of involvement with the countries of the WIO. The UK's 'East of Suez' withdrawal in 1968 saw a steady draw-down of its presence in the IOR and also in the WIO. This benign neglect intensified during the Cold War years, though the UK has maintained close defence relations with a few countries such as Kenya and Oman. However, in the same period, India's engagement with WIO countries, especially Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives and Sri Lanka, has intensified to the extent that today India is their closest security partner. The current strengths of both India and UK should, therefore, be coordinated to build both capacity and capability, not just in terms of individual countries, but also in areas where each country has its strength and expertise. During the British Prime Minister's recent visit to India, the joint statement released by both countries talked about their commitment to transform defence and security cooperation as a key pillar of the India-UK Comprehensive Security Partnership and enhance engagements in support of a free, open and secure Indo-Pacific. The statement also outlined several areas of bilateral cooperation, including operational interoperability, defence technical collaboration, logistics 'cooperation, cooperation in cyber security, etc<sup>46</sup>. , which offers a good roadmap for cooperation in the WIO as well.

## Capability-building

The first and most important area of capability-building is training. Training builds lasting bonds of friendship between trainees, and is probably the best investment in bilateral military engagement. India, today, is the preferred training destination for both basic and advanced level courses for the vast majority of the Armed Forces and Coast Guard personnel of most WIO countries, due to the professional and apolitical nature of its Armed Forces. The Indian Navy is also emerging as the preferred partner for operational sea training of ships. The UK too offers several training courses, mainly at the senior level.

In recent years, China has emerged as an important training destination for WIO countries due to their generous financial assistance and ready availability of training vacancies, though language, distance and cultural differences remain an impediment. Due to the shared history of our armed forces, there is adequate scope for synergising bilateral training efforts between India and the UK, especially as we share a common belief in democracy and the rule of law, which is an important, though intangible part of our training, and serves to strengthen these attributes in personnel who undergo training in our institutions.

This would be a long term and foundational counter to the precept of 'might is right' practised by China, which ultimately manifests in symptoms such as restrictions on the freedom of navigation, non-transparency and support to autocratic and non-democratic regimes in various countries.

## Capacity-building

WIO countries also require assistance in capacity-building, which includes the provision of hardware and infrastructure, as also doctrines and organisation structures for their use. It is in this area that major gains can be made through better Indo-UK cooperation and collaboration. China is today a major supplier of arms and ammunition to countries in the WIO. India is also emerging as a cost-effective supplier of platforms and equipment required by WIO countries, such as Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs), Patrol Craft, helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft, various low-end weapons and sensors, ammunition, and other defence items. The UK's strength lies in cutting-edge technologies and industries in the field of defence. There have been several rounds of discussions between both countries at the apex levels in collaborating in defence production by synergising the strengths of both countries. The advanced technological skills of the UK and the affordable manufacturing capability in India could be combined gainfully to supply defence equipment required by WIO countries, along with operator and maintenance support, either in-country or in India. It is also evident that there are a number of other matters, such as search and rescue, pollution control, marine scientific research, hydrography, etc., where most WIO littorals do not have the necessary expertise, resources or capacity, and where there is tremendous scope for Indo-UK cooperation.

## Operational Interaction

As brought out earlier, most WIO countries are small economies who can barely afford modest instruments of maritime power, such as patrol boats and shore-based surveillance systems. While enhancing their capability and capacity as much as possible, it is also necessary to assist them in ensuring their maritime security. The Indian Navy has been engaged in coordinated patrols along India's maritime boundaries with Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh. The Indian Navy also conducts patrols in the EEZ of many WIO countries, including Mauritius, Maldives, Madagascar, Mozambique and Seychelles, based on specific requests by their governments. These patrols are principally designed to restrict the spread of piracy, combat drug and arms smuggling, prevent IUU fishing and curb the spread of terrorism and fundamentalism. Despite the Royal Navy's limited deployment in the IOR, it has sufficient intelligence and logistics resources, which could contribute to the effectiveness of the Indian Navy's patrols. This would also assist in building inter-operability between the maritime forces of WIO countries, India and the UK, as a sort of a 'Quad-plus', thereby further strengthening democratic forces and under-writing the freedom of the seas.



## Cooperation on Climate Change and Ocean Management

Climate change is the biggest global security threat today. The WIO is particularly susceptible to its effects as 60% of the region's population lives within 100 km of the seas. A UNEP study has forecast that about 10 million people in East Africa and 40 million people in South Asia will become climate refugees by 2050 due to sea level rise and other climate-related problems, especially drought, if no remedial measure is taken by the global community<sup>47</sup>. Climate change is also affecting the very survival of several species of marine life and coral due to the warming and increasing acidification of the oceans, thereby affecting the livelihood and nutrition of millions of people. Dumping of waste in the oceans is another major problem, which is affecting marine habitat. Over-exploitation of ocean resources, especially through IUU fishing, requires to be redressed through measures such as the QUAD's partnership for Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) for combating illegal fishing. It is evident that climate change and oceanic pollution will endanger not just the prosperity, but also the very survival of some WIO countries, especially low-lying island states such as Maldives. Therefore, there is a need to for India and UK to support measures in the maritime domain, which could combat the effects of climate change and support the ten targets identified under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, by the United Nations.

## Blue Economy Cooperation

The annual "gross marine product" of the Western Indian Ocean region – equivalent to a country's annual gross domestic product (GDP) – estimated by a WWF study is at least USD 20.8 billion. The total "ocean asset base" of the Western Indian Ocean region is at least USD 333.8 billion. These values are derived from direct outputs from the ocean (e.g., fisheries), services supported by the ocean (e.g., marine tourism), and adjacent benefits associated with the coastlines (e.g., carbon sequestration). Coastal and marine tourism make the largest economic contribution, accounting for 69% of ocean output (USD 14.3 billion annually). Carbon sequestration accounts for 14% (USD 2.9 billion) of the gross marine product and fisheries for 9% (USD 1.9 billion)<sup>48</sup>. This does not measure important intangible values such as the ocean's role in climate regulation and temperature stabilisation, the production of oxygen, the spiritual and cultural enrichment the ocean provides, or the intrinsic value of biodiversity. Further, it is difficult to put a monetary figure on the contribution made by activities such as subsistence fishing where no sale point occurs. As a result, the numbers presented here are conservative estimates. Outputs that are not dependent on the ecological functions of the ocean – such as those from offshore mineral extraction or shipping – are also excluded from these estimates<sup>49</sup>. Most of the WIO countries require technology and expertise to exploit their resources in a sustainable manner, where UK and India could collaborate.

## Providing an Alternate to the BRI

As has been discussed earlier, China's predatory economic policies, especially as part of the BRI, are designed to seek collateral in lieu of debt repayments, should a country not be able to meet its obligations. This is clearly illustrated by the examples of Laos, Djibouti and Sri Lanka, where debt has been repaid by leasing real estate/infrastructure to Chinese Public Sector companies for periods as long as 99 years. Indeed, Pakistan could be next, going by the current dire economic straits that the country presently faces. China's intention to create 'strategic strong points', has been clearly stated in its policy documents. It is also evident that such 'strategic strong points' are also envisaged to become military outposts and bases over time, and the dual-use infrastructure being constructed clearly points towards that purpose. Such a process is only possible through non-transparent contracts which are generally concluded with authoritarian and/or corrupt governments. There is an urgent need for public advocacy to assist in exposing incorrect and corrupt practices, and combine resources between like-minded countries to provide alternate avenues for creation of necessary infrastructure, such as: the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, the European Union's Global Gateway project; India's SAGAR initiative; and the QUAD's recent commitment of USD 50 billion for 'sustainable and demand-driven infrastructure' in the Indo-Pacific.

## Conclusion

China's sustained investment in the IOR, especially after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, has led to a substantial increase in its presence and influence in the region. At the same time, the US focus on the Pacific and its pre-occupation with conflicts in the Middle-East and Afghanistan, has led to relative neglect of the geopolitical significance of the region. This neglect has intensified after the US exit from Iraq and Afghanistan. However, India has stepped in to partially fill the void and counter the geo-strategic challenge posed by China, as security and stability in the IOR is directly related to India's own security interests and economic prosperity.<sup>50</sup>

However, due to unprecedented levels of military, diplomatic and economic investment and engagement by China in the IOR in general, and the WIO in particular, there is a need for like-minded democracies, such as India and the United Kingdom, to work together towards the common goal of ensuring a democratic and rules-based international order. This paper has attempted to identify several areas where Indo-UK cooperation could be synergised, especially in the WIO. Doing so is even more important now, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has already re-focussed the West's attention back to the Euro-Atlantic, which would leave the Indo-Pacific free for China's continued expansion. This development could impact IOR littorals and the world adversely, if not countered in time.

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# Blue Economy and Sustainable Development in the Western Indian Ocean Region: The Case for India-United Kingdom Partnership

**Abhishek Mishra**

## Abstract

The concept of Blue Economy (BE) refers to economic activities that are in balance with the long-term capacity of ocean ecosystems to support this activity and remain healthy and resilient. The African Union (AU) termed BE as the 'new frontier of Africa's renaissance' as it recognises the benefits of promoting sustainable use of the continent's vast oceanic resources in order to benefit the African people. With a total natural asset base of USD 333.8 billion, the Western Indian Ocean provides a wide array of opportunities for innovation in untapped sectors like fisheries, ports, maritime transport and shipping. Although the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) has made progress towards conserving the natural asset base, the ocean ecosystem is under direct and indirect pressure from resource exploitation and human-induced habitat degradation. The Covid-19 pandemic has also unravelled a lot of the progress made in the absence of state support. This paper takes stock of the present nature and future potential of sustainable BE development in the WIOR, and highlights areas in which international partners like India and the United Kingdom (UK) could collaborate with WIOR littorals in developing their BE agenda.

## Keywords

Blue Economy, WIOR, India, United Kingdom, Africa, Sustainable Development

## Introduction

Africa is a continent completely surrounded by water, harbouring thirty-eight coastal states among its fifty-four countries, including many Small Island States. However, for the longest time, the continent tended to suffer from a culture of “sea blindness” i.e., the phenomenon of ignoring the critical importance of waters and the maritime domain. Knowledge and awareness of the benefits of sea water and resources has been limited and as such states have tended to neglect their coastlines. This was largely the result of the continent’s colonial legacy that prompted an inward and continental outlook. Post-colonial African states tended to prioritise local and more pressing issues such as economic development and settling inter-state disputes, civil war, or transnational terrorism. The sea was not viewed as a place in need of security considerations.

However, a spate of escalating hijackings (piracy) in and around the east coast of Africa between 2005 and 2012 raised concerns in many quarters as international trade and commerce was threatened. The maritime spaces around Africa became riddled with mounting insecurities as Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, illicit trade in narcotics and wildlife products, and dumping of toxic waste, became a matter of serious regional and international concern. The last decade has witnessed a flurry of activity and undertakings that prioritises maritime domain and maritime security. Today, collectively, Africa realises the significance of maritime domain and is working together to tap opportunities and meet the challenges involved.

The actors threatening the African Maritime Domain (AMD) continues to grow in number and capability. As a result, there has been a subsequent endeavour to address these threats at the national, regional, and continental level. Towards this, African states have established several instruments and strategies to effectively deal with the maritime domain. Initially, from early 2000 onwards, African states began to convene series of conferences, symposiums, and meetings to discuss maritime security issues. International organisations like the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) sponsored many of these meetings, which eventually became the basis of regional agreements, such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC)<sup>1</sup> and Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC)<sup>2</sup>, and pan-African strategies like the 2050 AIM Strategy (AIMS 2050)<sup>3</sup> and the Lomé Charter<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>The Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) was adopted on 29 January 2009 and was signed by 20 Western Indian Ocean littoral states with the aim of collaborating together to combat and suppress piracy in the Western Indian Ocean Region by sharing maritime information and conducting regional training.

<sup>2</sup>The Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC) was signed in 2013 and consists of 21 articles that establish how member countries will address the issues of piracy, armed robbery, and other illicit maritime crimes in the Gulf of Guinea.

<sup>3</sup>The 2050 AIM Strategy is the Africa’s continent-wide maritime strategy developed by the African Union’s (AU). The strategy aims to economically exploit Africa’s oceans and water bodies in the interest of maritime economy. The strategy also builds up on realising the opportunities and partake the benefits of ocean resources in an environmentally sustainable manner.

<sup>4</sup>The Lomé Charter was signed on 15 October, 2016 as a follow up to the AU’s 2050 AIMS. The charter forms a blueprint for the advancement of Africa’s seapower and maritime



International partners like the United States, India, China, Japan, and European Union, began to deploy their naval ships and conduct anti-piracy patrols. Successful multinational efforts to patrol these waters and efforts by regional and international forces have helped reduce piracy in East Africa (EA), Horn of Africa (HOA) and Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR), although the situation in Gulf of Guinea and West Africa has deteriorated alarmingly in recent years.

Piracy or armed robbery at sea has sensitised both Africa and the international community to the threats off Africa, but it has also skewed perceptions about Africa's maritime landscape. The challenges are broader in nature and the resultant strategies employed by African countries go beyond simply tackling piracy. African maritime strategies look beyond the challenges and threats and focus on common interests of wealth creation and sustainable governance.

Subsequently, there has been an effective realisation on part of African leaders and governments on the vast potential its resource-rich maritime domain has to offer. Africa's oceans and water bodies are increasingly becoming a source of economic opportunity, holding potential in fields of energy (both renewable and non-renewable), food, tourism, and transportation that links Africa with the global economy. This is why African countries are paying attention to concepts such as 'Blue Economy' (BE) or 'blue growth' which is vital for the sustainable development of Africa's coastal economies and ensuring food and energy security. It is important to understand and realise that maritime security and BE are intimately linked. Secure oceans are a precondition for the development of the BE, and a stronger BE could play a vital role in alleviating some of the root causes of maritime crimes.

The WIOR's ecosystem is critical for food security and economic development for ten states in eastern and southern Africa. Its coastline stretches for more than 15000 km and has a continental shelf area of some 450000 km<sup>2</sup>. Along this area, falls ten African countries – Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, and the small island nations of Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Comoros, and the French overseas territory of Réunion. Over 60 million people rely directly on this biogeographic hotspot, which is increasingly under threat from climate change and unsustainable human practices. According to a World-Wide Fund report (2017), the WIOR's "total natural assets have been conservatively estimated at USD 333.8 billion." Therefore, it is imperative for relevant regional, local, and international actors to foster collaboration in order to protect the region's rich biodiversity and ensure good governance and a sustainable BE.

Along with their African counterparts, foreign partners like India and the United Kingdom (UK) are well-placed to collaborate on the BE domain. For India, the growth attention paid by African states towards the development of maritime security and sustainable use of marine resources has been a welcome development. The waters of the Indian Ocean, which ties India's western coast with Africa's eastern coast, has emerged as the primary conduit through which India has engaged with African countries in the maritime domain. This is particularly true of the resource-rich WIOR and its littorals with which India has traditionally enjoyed close ties. A significant portion of Indian diaspora resides in these WIO littorals. From a commercial, developmental, and geo-strategic point of view, the WIO region holds immense potential for India and African countries. In their quest for growth and development, resource-rich East African countries are paying increased attention to the Indian Ocean.

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developmental potential. The idea of the Lomé Charter is to take African blue economy and maritime security agenda forward.

The United Kingdom (UK) has both bilateral and multilateral military engagements in the WIOR, including in Djibouti and Kenya, and with African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), now transitioned into African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). These engagements include regional training. There is also the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) which operates in the WIOR and has the capacity to provide real-time information to commercial maritime vessels. It coordinates a wide variety of regional maritime operation centres but is not a military coordinator. This gives the UK an ability to protect its maritime trade and assist regional countries in maintaining maritime security in the Gulf of Aden and WIOR.

This paper takes stock of the present nature and future potential of sustainable BE development in the WIOR and highlights ways in which international partners like India and the UK could collaborate with WIOR littorals in developing their BE agenda. The first section analyses Africa's continental BE strategy that was born out of the first sustainable BE conference held in November 2018 in Nairobi, Kenya. The second section highlights the main sectors that are driving BE in Africa. This is followed by an assessment of how the twin concepts of maritime security and BE are inter-linked and mutually complements each other. The fourth and the fifth section details the BE strategic frameworks adopted by WIOR countries and their efforts to conserve coastal and marine ecosystems through the development of MPAs and LMMAs, respectively. Following this, the paper highlights the fundamental challenges faced by WIOR countries due to the pandemic, especially in areas like climate change, fisheries, and tourism. The final section makes a case for international cooperation between India, UK and WIOR countries.

## Blue Economy: The new frontier of Africa's renaissance

The concept of Blue Economy (BE) is defined by the World Bank as the "sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihood and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health." A comprehensive definition of BE is yet to be agreed upon. There are many terms that may create confusion: Terms such as "marine economy" or "coastal economy" do not capture the essence of the concept of Blue Economy. The idea of BE was first articulated by Professor Gunter Pauli in 2010 and later discussed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio + 20, in 2012. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), "Blue Economy" aims to "integrate all activities and resources derived from marine and aquatic systems, including oceans, seas, coasts, rivers, lakes and groundwater." The concept of BE "recognises the crucial importance of productive and healthy freshwater and oceans ecosystems, as a pathway for economic development." This is articulated in the AU's AIMS 2050. In addition to providing opportunities to achieve SDG 14 on the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources, BE could also contribute to ending poverty (SDG 1), improving food security and eliminating poverty (SDG 2), accessing clean water (SDG 6), and providing decent job opportunities (SDG 8).

In the African context, the BE holds immense potential for all littoral states of Africa. Collectively, African coastal and island states encompass vast ocean territories. This is estimated to be 13 million km<sup>2</sup>. The strategic importance of these water bodies and wetlands is immense. The AU has constantly urged African countries to adopt policies that promote the sustainable use of Africa's oceanic resources for their economic and social development. Subsequently, the AU has declared Blue Economy as the 'new frontier of Africa's renaissance.'

The objective of utilisation of resources of ocean and water bodies and at the same time conservation of biodiversity is integrated in the concept of BE. The reasonable use of resources and focusing equally on sustainability is the centrepiece of the concept of BE. A number of policies adopted at the global level reflect this balance between resource utilisation and conservation. Many African policy frameworks and international declarations including the African Union's Agenda 2063, Aquaculture in Africa (PFRS)<sup>5</sup>; the 2015 UN Agenda 2030 (Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs); and the 2016 Lomé Charter; and other policy and legal instruments have reflected the need to find a balance between resource exploitation and maintaining the ecosystem.

One of the most important developments towards the evolution of BE in Africa was the Sustainable Blue Economy Conference in November 2018 of Nairobi, Kenya. The conference deliberated on the challenges and opportunities for BE growth. Africa's leaders committed to developing the Africa's Blue Economy Strategy following the Nairobi Conference. Consequently, the African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR), within the African Union Commission has been given the responsibility to develop the Africa Blue Economy Strategy. Accordingly, the African BE Strategy is consolidated based on five detailed thematic areas considered critical to the BE growth in Africa.

### **1. Fisheries, aquaculture, conservation and sustainable aquatic ecosystems–**

Fisheries make significant contribution to the food and income security of millions of Africans. Despite its potential, the sector has been unable to contribute to the sustainable development of its people. The foremost reason for this is overexploitation, particularly IUU fishing by distant water fishing vessels.

### **2. Shipping/transportation, trade, ports, maritime security, safety and enforcement–**

The maritime transportation and shipping sector play a critical role in the continent's trade because "over 90% of Africa's imports and exports are conducted by sea." "Despite the large volume of trade by sea, Africa only accounts for a meagre 2.7% of global trade value, 7% of global seaborne trade, and 5% of maritime import and export by volume."

### **3. Coastal and maritime tourism, climate change, resilience, environment and infrastructure-**

Growth of tourism in the continent would boost development of tourism centred services and infrastructure. Eco-tourism could be a positive factor in preservation of ecosystem.

### **4. Sustainable energy and mineral resources, and innovative industries–**

Marine renewable energy is increasingly growing on the continent. The growing demand for electricity in the continent can be met by using oceanic currents to generate electricity.

### **5. Polices, institutional and governance, employment, job creation and poverty eradication, and innovative financing**

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<sup>5</sup>The full abbreviation of PFRS is Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa

These aforementioned verticals are drawn from the framework of the November 2018 Nairobi Sustainable BE conference. In Africa, blue growth makes substantial contribution to the economy through various sectors. According to the AU-IBAR, “African BE sectors and components generate today a value of USD 296 billion with 49 million jobs. It is projected that by 2030, figures will be respectively USD 405 billion and 57 million jobs while in 2063 estimates would respectively be USD 576 billion of value created and 78 million of jobs.” However, the potential of BE in Africa is yet to be realised. Blue growth through sustainable exploration of the sea in Africa is mostly difficult to attain due to issues like limited investments by the state in BE sectors, inadequate knowledge, and limited technical capacity.

Okafor-Yarwood et.al, (2020) examine few unsuccessful and successful community-based and government-based BE interventions in African countries and provide an assessment of blue projects in Africa. The study is based on ecological, economic and social implications and outcomes of such interventions. On unsuccessful BE projects in Africa, they note that:

“While the governments of the respective countries have the right intentions about developing their ocean economies, emphasis is placed predominantly on economic outcomes, with limited attention given to social equity and ecological sustainability.”

In contrast, successful BE projects are people-centred. Okafor-Yarwood et.al, suggest that for African coastal states to truly benefit from BE, they need to adopt a functional institutional governance framework – one which emphasises equitability, fairness, and a sustainable BE for Africans. Social equity and ecological conservation must be incorporated in the development of BE in Africa.

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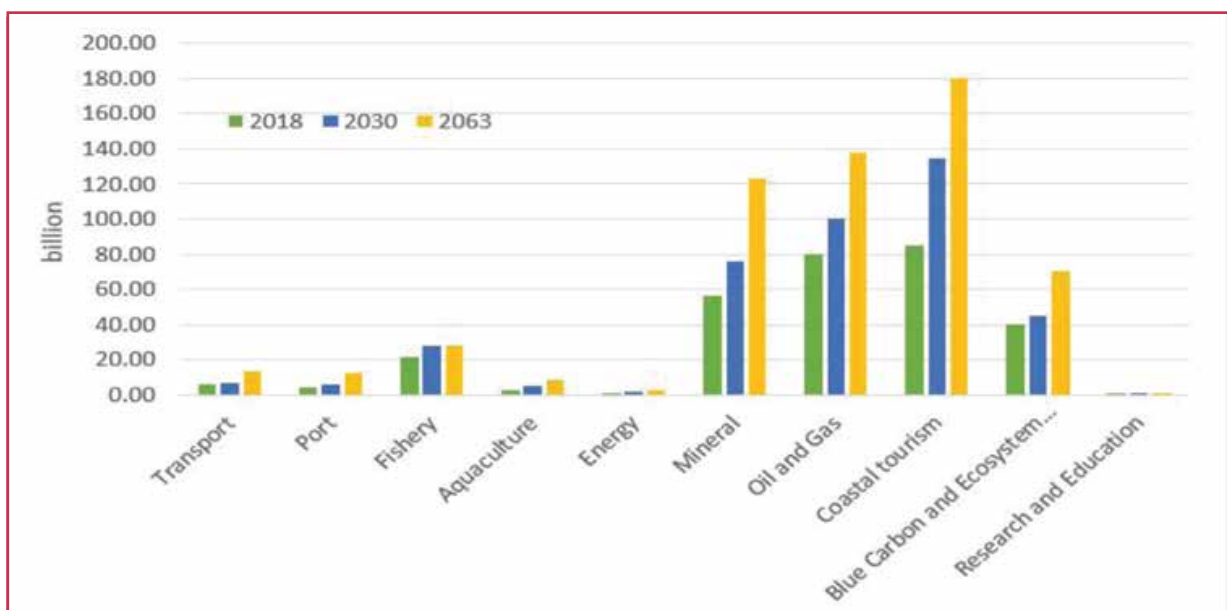
<sup>6</sup>Some examples of unsuccessful BE projects in Africa as enlisted by Okafor-Yarwood et al, are: Port of Kribi Project, Kribi, Cameroon; Vridi Canal Project, Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire; Lamu Port Project, Kenya; The Sandpiper Marine Phosphate Mining Project, Namibia

<sup>7</sup>Some examples of successful BE projects in Africa as enlisted by Okafor-Yarwood et al, are: TRY Oyster Women’s Association, the Gambia; Vezo Community Fisheries, Madagascar; Mikoko Pamoja, Kenya; Seaweed Farming, Kenya

## Sectors driving Blue Economy in Africa

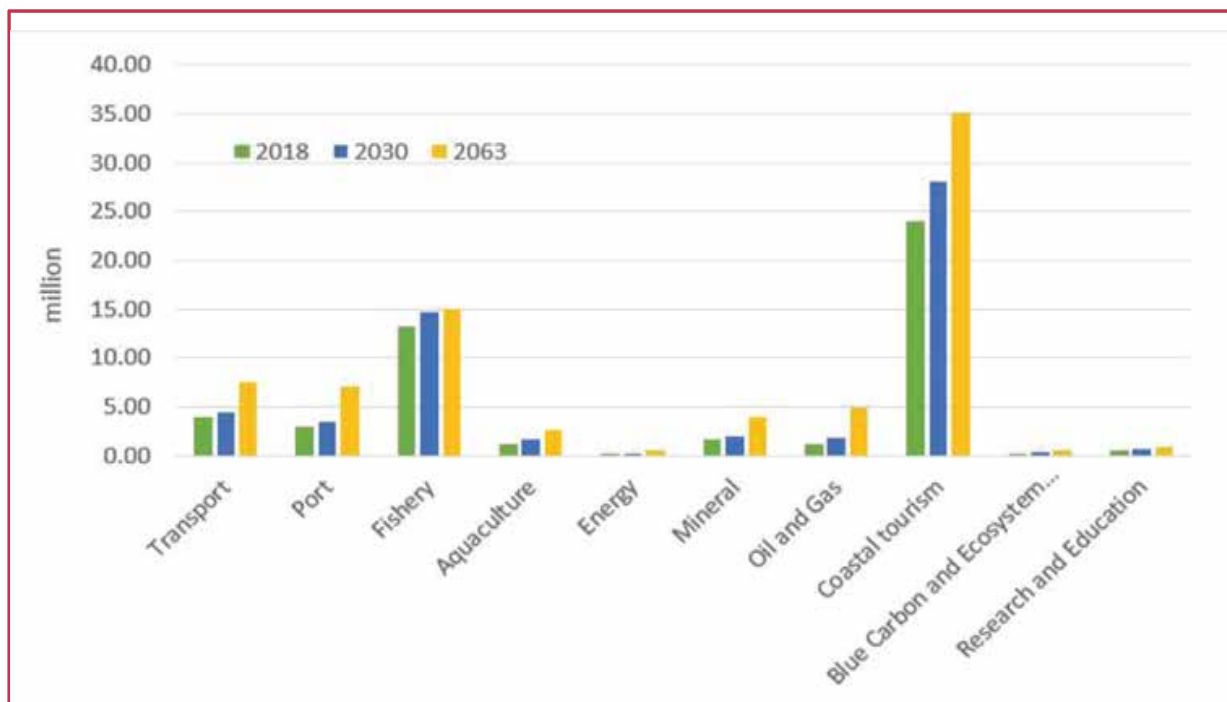
Tourism is the foremost sector that is driving BE in Africa, both in terms of value added and jobs created. This is followed by the mineral sector and oil and gas sector that contributes in the form of value addition but has a low participation in the job creation process. The fisheries sector in Africa is important and is expected to remain stable over the coming years due to large number of people being employed in the sector. It is useful to note that African countries have a long history of conservation efforts. As such conservation efforts continue to expand, "the value of blue carbon and other ecosystem services generated by marine, coastal and aquatic ecosystems is expected to progressively increase in the coming years."

**Figure 1: Value created by BE sectors (value added) and components (value of services)**



Source: AU-IBAR, Blue Economy Strategy, 2019: 4

**Figure 2: Employment generated by BE sectors and components**



Source: AU-IBAR, Blue Economy Strategy, 2019: 5

- **Port and Shipping** – The African continent’s share of global trade is small, around 3 percent. However, Africa’s shipping is witnessing an upward trend. In the last five years, Africa’s container ports have grown at an average of 8 percent. Due to investments in port modernisation by external partners, African ports are now better suited to accommodate large ships. This is expected to increase port traffic.
- **Fishery** – Fisheries are the largest natural asset in the WIOR followed by mangroves, sea grass and coral reefs. There are many local, artisanal, small-scale fishermen who depend on fisheries for their livelihood and sustenance across the continent. The total gross value-added of the fisheries sector in Africa is estimated at USD 21 billion or 1.2% of the GDP of African countries.
- **Aquaculture** – The value of African aquaculture sector is estimated at USD 2.77 billion. Although investment in aquaculture is growing, it is limited to only a few countries like Egypt and Nigeria. The Western Indian Ocean littorals requires more attention in this sector.
- **Ocean mining** – Seawater and deep seabed mining are considered to be the new frontier with enormous potential. Top seabed mining materials such as diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, zinc could have immense value added.

- **Oil and Gas** - The recent discoveries of oil and gas reserves in the WIOR has led many external powers to look at the region with keen interest. Many governments on the Eastern coast of Africa have relied on oil rents in order to diversify their national economies. Oil rents mostly relate to the revenues that a country gains above the cost of extracting the resources. Over the last decade, there has been significant discovery and development of large offshore gas deposits, especially in countries like Mozambique, Tanzania, and South Africa, particularly during 2010-2014. It is estimated that the combined discoveries off the southern coast of Tanzania and northern coast of Mozambique “indicate the presence of at least 150 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas.”
- **Coastal tourism** – Many countries in the WIOR like Mauritius, Seychelles, and Tanzania depend on the tourism industry to generate revenues and create employment. The Covid-19 pandemic has deeply affected the sector but it still has the potential to expand and grow since most areas are yet to be explored. The AU-IBAR report (2019) estimates that “in 2030 the value added generated by coastal tourism should exceed 100 billion with 28 million people employed while in 2063, it should generate 138 billion of value added with an employment figure of 35 million.”

## How maritime security and blue economy are inter-linked?

Maritime security and BE are both recent concepts and provide an opportunity to re-evaluate the attention that countries pay towards oceans. They are mostly two sides of the same coin in the sense that both the concepts aim to find ways in which to better protect the oceans. In principle, maritime security underscores the attention to the threats, risks, and dangers posed to the oceans, whereas BE is more optimistic as it deals with the potential to sustainably use the oceans.

There are various reasons why BE and maritime security are mutually inter-linked. Firstly, it is imperative for countries to ensure that maritime or marine protection laws are properly enforced by concerned authorities. Without ensuring compliance, such laws or regulations would fail to prove their utility. Secondly, marine protection requires a certain degree of surveillance to understand if the measures are working or not. Thirdly, if the maritime environment is riddled with a high degree of insecurities, then it would directly prevent more investments in the economy. Lastly, blue crimes<sup>8</sup> thrive under conditions of instability, which could directly undermine economic development of states.

It is important to acknowledge that law enforcement at sea is expensive and countries need to find ways of funding this exercise. Ideally, the revenues generated from BE could be a source of such funding. Economic development is a prerequisite to prevent blue crimes. This is mostly because lack of employment opportunities might create incentives for engaging in blue crimes. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between sustainable BE development and maritime safety and security at sea. Additionally, the data and information collected on maritime activities like fish stocks, biodiversity development, among others, as a result of maritime surveillance, could help to enhance sea-based law enforcement.

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<sup>8</sup>Professor Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds in their paper “Blue Crime: Conceptualising transnational organised crime at sea” (2020), categorises ‘blue crimes’ into three core groups – crimes against mobility (piracy); illicit criminal flows (smuggling); and environmental crimes (IUU fishing and marine pollution). For more, see [http://www.safe-seas.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BlueCrimeFinal\\_optimize.pdf](http://www.safe-seas.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BlueCrimeFinal_optimize.pdf)

There are also a number of practical convergences between maritime security and BE. Certain joint measures need to be conducted in order to benefit from both sides of the coin. For example, the designing and protecting marine protection areas and environmental law needs to consider both the prospects of BE and also the manner in which these laws are enforced. In addition, both BE and maritime security share a common agenda when it comes to 'blue justice'. This entails dealing with the question of fair distribution of incomes and risks, i.e. Who benefits from the BE or who loses out?

Therefore, it is evident why maritime security and BE need each other and both share a similar agenda. In an African context, both concepts are required when deciding projects and programmes on Marine Protected Areas (MPA). However, there are a number of departments, organisations, and professionals, that deal with specific aspects of the agenda. For example, the Heads of African coast guard or navies or the marine police are responsible for ensuring maritime security, whereas BE actors including fishing and port authorities. Hence, it is imperative for maritime security practitioners and those developing BE to work together and collaborate with each other in order to protect the oceans and coastal population that are highly dependent on them. Secure oceans are a precondition for the development of the BE, and a stronger BE could play a vital role in alleviating some of the root causes of maritime crimes.

## Blue Economy Strategic Frameworks of WIOR countries

African countries have adopted various documents/frameworks that focus on the development of their BE. The aim is to highlight the socio-economic benefits of the ocean economy and potential of oceanic resources for fostering economic activities and development. There is a positive correlation between under-development and maritime insecurity. In many ways, maritime security and 'blue economy' are two sides of the same coin. Without maritime security and effective law enforcement at sea, it would be difficult to sustainably harvest ocean resources and protect the marine environment. In the same manner, without the prospects of the BE, coastal communities will continue to lack the necessary incentives to refrain from supporting illegal activities at sea.

There are various expected economic, social and environmental benefits of BE. Economically, BE is expected to accelerate economic growth and diversification, reduce poverty, and create jobs. Social benefits include improving livelihood for poor and marginalised, include local voices in decision-making, reduce income and gender inequality, and create more jobs for women. Some environmental benefits may include generation of revenues for environmental conservation, sharing of best practices, and improving regional and joint collaboration of marine resources and environment.

Bolaky (2020) points out that even though none of the WIOR countries "source a significant share of their export earnings and GDP from a diversified BE base, they nonetheless have identified BE as a potential driver of socio-economic development." Subsequently, a host of strategic frameworks have been adopted by WIOR countries.



- **South Africa** – Its BE model is ‘Operation Phakisa’ – launched in 2014, literally translates to “hurry up”, pointing to the urgent realisation of the importance of unlocking the economic potential of its ocean waters.
- **Mauritius** – Despite having a small landmass, the island nation has a vast maritime zone of 2.3 million square kilometres. Traditional oceanic activities like fishing, coastal tourism, seafood processing represent 10% of Mauritius’ GDP and employs thousands of people.
- **Comoros** – It is estimated that Comoros’ EEZ is 100 times larger than its landmass, thereby indicating the massive role its ocean economy could play in national growth and sustainability.
- **Mozambique** – The Mozambique Policy and Strategy of the Sea (POLMAR) was developed in 2017 to develop a “blue, profitable and sustainable economy at sea.”
- **Seychelles** – Its strategy is known as The Seychelles Blue Economic Strategic Policy Framework and Roadmap: Charting the Future (2018-2030). The island nation is a leader in ‘Marine Spatial Planning’ which is “a public process of analysing and allocating the spatial and temporal distribution of human activities in marine areas to achieve ecological, economic, social objectives, usually specified through a political process.” In 2012, the government of Seychelles set a goal of protecting 50% of its territorial areas and 30% of its EEZ, including 15% in ‘fully protected areas’. law enforcement.

## Conservation of coastal and marine ecosystem in WIOR through Marine Protected Areas and Locally Managed Marine Areas

The WIOR boasts a rich marine biodiversity, especially the region’s widespread coral reef systems. The mangroves, seagrass, coastal forests, and rocky and sandy shorelines are part of the rich biodiversity of the region. There are a vast number of rare, endemic, and endangered marine species that are scattered across the many islets and atolls in the WIO region. Although the region has a relatively intact coastline, there are growing signs of distress. The coastal ecosystem is being overexploited and is experiencing degradation. Fish stocks, coral reefs, and mangroves are degrading at a rapid and concerning pace. Therefore, there is an immediate need for the WIOR countries to protect their marine and coastal ecosystem by promoting marine conservation efforts.

The WIOR has a long history of marine conservation and contains some of the largest and oldest marine protected areas (MPA) and locally managed marine areas (LMMA). Countries like Kenya, Tanzania and Madagascar have taken a lot of interest in creating or expanding their MPAs and LMMAs to address the need of local communities and meet international conservation goals enumerated under Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)<sup>9</sup> and UN SDGs.

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<sup>9</sup>The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) entered into force on 29 December, 1993 with three primary objectives – biological diversity, the sustainable use of the components of biological diversity, and the fair and equitable sharing. For more, see <https://www.cbd.int/>

In order to conserve marine biodiversity, it is necessary to declare marine protected areas (MPAs). WIO countries have identified and made necessary declarations in this regard. The first MPA in Africa was Tsitsikamma in South Africa established way back in 1964, shortly followed by the Malindi and Watamu in Kenya. These initiatives aimed at marine conservation continued to increase through the following decades.

According to a UNEP-Nairobi Convention and Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) report, currently, “there are 143 formally proclaimed MPAs in the WIO, covering a total of 555,436.68km<sup>2</sup>” In the last two decades, the number of MPAs in the WIOR has increased significantly. Most of the MPAs in the WIO region protect coastal habitats. However, there are around 20 offshore MPAs in the region which are proclaimed over large areas of deep-sea habitats. These, which are found mostly in the French territories in the WIO, South Africa and Seychelles, “contribute the largest proportion of the total area under protection in the WIO region.”

Country	EEZ (km <sup>2</sup> )	No. of existing MPAs	MPA area (km <sup>2</sup> )	% EEZ protected	No. of Proposed MPAs	Proposed MPA area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Total potential % EEZ
Comoros	160 000	1	449	0.28	3	180.9	0.39
French Territories in WIO	1 009 455	5	111 427	11.04	0	0	11.04
Kenya	142 000	6	941	0.67	3	TBD	TBD
Madagascar	1 147 712	22	14 451	1.26	1	4321	1.64
Mauritius	2 300 000	18	139	0.01	1	97	0.01
Mozambique	571 452	7	11 999	2.10	1	140.2	2.12
Seychelles	1 336 559	16	353 663	26.40	TBD	50 000	30.00
South Africa (mainland)	1 072	41	57 943	5.4	0	0	TBD

Upon examining these numbers, it becomes clear that the regional situation of proposed MPAs and protected EEZs in the WIO region is not very encouraging. Only two states (Seychelles and French territories in WIO) both with large off-shore MPAs, could claim to have met the 10 percent of EEZ target. States like Comoros, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Kenya are currently protecting less than one percent of their EEZs through formal MPAs.

In this context, it is vital for WIO states to work towards developing plans for integrated ocean management at not just the national level, but also on the regional and sub-regional levels. “The task of managing the oceans and developing effective maritime spatial planning for African countries is made more difficult due to the sheer expansive size and politically complex nature of the WIO.” Therefore, a sub-regional approach is necessary in order to solve large-scale issues. Just like we have already seen, countries like Seychelles and South Africa are using marine spatial planning (MSP) in order to define ocean-use and protection.

## Fundamental challenges in WIOR post-Covid

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought major disruption to Africa’s economic activity by reducing commodity prices, disrupting global supply chains, and interrupting African countries’ growth trajectories. The pandemic has complicated efforts to address some of the existential threats affecting the oceans, such as pollution, loss of biodiversity, and rise in sea levels. Migration patterns have been altered in the WIOR. The “Eastern Route” i.e., Horn of Africa to Yemen, was one of the most travelled in the world prior to the pandemic. This now strands disrupted due to the conflict in Tigray.

The trade networks in the WIOR are also increasingly exploited by illicit actors’ vulnerabilities in regional maritime security, corruption, and limited enforcement capacity. A report by Stable Seas estimates that there are 19 active violent non-state actors (VNSAs) that operate in the WIOR. Trafficking of narcotics and wildlife products has expanded in recent years, along with small arms and light weapons trade between Somalia and Yemen.

The coastal and marine ecosystem of the WIOR is under increasing pressure and is showing growing signs of distress. The areas that are still in comparatively good health owe it to the low levels of industrialisation and economic development. However, as African economies continue to grow, these conditions would invariably undergo change. Activities like industrial shipping, oil and gas exploitation, shipping, agriculture and coastal development will likely impact the total natural asset base of the WIOR unless proactive measures are undertaken by littoral states.

- **Climate Change** – The issue of climate change in the WIOR is alarming and requires urgent attention. Climate change continues to have devastating impacts on regional maritime security through natural disasters, coastal degradation, ocean warming, and rise in sea levels. Due to rising atmospheric temperatures, drought trends are expected to increase and monsoon would get difficult to forecast. All these trends endanger livelihoods and especially food security. This is evident from the rapidly worsening food insecurity in East Africa. World Food Programme (WFP) notes that in the East African region, “81.6 million people including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees and host communities in rural and urban areas are facing high acute food insecurity.” Ocean warming is also affecting fish stocks in the WIOR and is being accentuated by overexploitation by foreign fishing trawlers.
- **Impact on Fisheries** – The WIOR has some of the most robust fisheries in the world, thereby making regional resource management a high priority. However, climate change and population growth in the region is leading to local artisanal small-scale fishers’ resort to unsustainable fishing gears and practices. Decline in coral reefs, mangroves and seagrass beds leads to a decline of their function as a nursery for fishes. This subsequently is leading to the shrinking of adult fish population and declining fish catches in the region. The WFP estimates point that 71-100% of coral reefs are at risk in all WIOR countries due to mass bleaching of corals in addition to declining fish stocks. “Nearly 35% of fish stocks are fully exploited and 25% are overexploited.”
- **Impact on Tourism** – The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted global tourism, including in WIOR countries. For tourism-dependent countries and populations in the region, less tourism would result in fewer jobs for coastal populations, less revenue for national governments to use to provide services, and less economic security – both nationally and individually. Although countries have started opening borders and international travel is slowly resuming, it is going to take years for the situation to normalise. “Seychelles is estimated to have a 64 percent reduction in tourism compared to 2019 levels.” The same sort of impact is expected in countries like Mauritius, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa.

## The Case for International Cooperation in WIOR – India and the United Kingdom

It is useful to acknowledge that oceans are shared spaces where a strong international collaboration is a pre-requisite for a secure maritime domain. The cross-border and liminal (transnational) nature of threats makes international cooperation critical and the WIOR is no stranger to these dynamics. The region has been at the centre of a host of capacity building assistance initiatives mainly steered by external partners but also by regional African countries. The nature of these capacity building initiatives includes several aspects of the maritime domain. These included, but were not limited to, developing regional law enforcement capacities, information sharing tools, and improving maritime patrols and surveillance systems. The experience of all initiatives in the WIOR have been a mixed one and have experienced varying degrees of success.

In India, the size of the BE has been conservatively estimated to be around 4% of the GDP. PM Modi alluded to the potential of BE in a speech in Mauritius where he referred to the potential of the blue chakra or wheel in Indian national flag as representing the potential of the “blue revolution”, or “ocean economy”. India’s draft BE policy compiled by Government of India’s Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) identifies seven thematic areas: Coastal Marine Spatial Planning and Tourism; Marine Fisheries, Aquaculture and Fish Processing; Manufacturing, Emerging Industries, Trade, Technology, Services and Skill Development; Logistics, Infrastructure, Shipbuilding including Transshipment; Coastal and Deep-sea Mining and Offshore Energy; Security, Strategic Dimensions and International Engagement; and finally, setting up of a National Accounting Framework for the BE and Ocean Governance.

Similarly, the BE is embedded in the UK’s national economy. It is estimated that in 2017, the UK BE contributed around EUR 2 billion to the UK national Gross Value Added. The UK’s BE sector primarily comprises of marine non-living resources (oil and gas), coastal tourism, port activities, shipbuilding and repairs and maritime transport.

Already, the Roadmap 2030 for India-UK future relations launched in May 2021 has identified the WIOR as a primary area for India-UK collaboration. The main goal is to “promote freedom of navigation and open access, and improve maritime cooperation in the WIOR.” Work is progressing on this front with India and the UK holding “Maritime Dialogue” and collaborating on Grey and Dark shipping information sharing and mechanisms for operational co-ordination. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), where the UK is a dialogue partner, and which has 9 African countries encompassing the WIOR as members, is an important regional organisation that could foster closer India-UK maritime cooperation.

India and the UK should prioritise setting up a joint task force on BE, along the lines of what India has done with Norway and France. Such a task force would enable both partners to consult regularly and deliberate on ways to improve ocean space management, reduce plastic pollution, reduce waste management through identified joint projects, and for their respective maritime industries to partner in building zero-emission ships. Additionally, India’s Deep Ocean Mission which is aimed at developing technologies for the exploitation of oceanic resources and mapping the rich marine biodiversity could be utilised in the WIOR. This is due to the fact that almost 64% of African waters are yet to be systematically surveyed. India’s National Hydrographic Office and the UK Hydrographic Office could collaborate in this regard.

## Conclusion

The Blue Economy (BE) is vital to the sustainable development of coastal economies, global food and energy security, and international commerce. It is important to acknowledge that sustaining a healthy ocean cannot be achieved by one country alone. By their very nature, several issues that threaten the health of the Western Indian Ocean – such as declining fish stocks, marine pollution, ocean acidification, and climate change, among others – requires a collaborative effort between regional countries and international partners to address these concerns. The countries in the region need to protect their natural assets so that they can deliver benefits to their societies.

Fortunately, several countries in the WIOR have already developed ocean policies, strategic plans, and/or BE strategies. Countries like Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa have adopted BE strategies, whereas Kenya and Mozambique have adopted 'green economy'. Madagascar, Kenya, and Tanzania have also developed legislation strengthening community participation and empowerment in natural resource governance.

“Partnerships will be vital to assist governments to ensure aligned and mutually-supportive actions across all SDGs.” This could take the form of international cooperation, public-private partnerships (PPP), and co-management partnerships between governments, communities and civil society, with the objective of unlocking the productive potential of oceanic assets in the WIOR. For any BE projects in the WIOR to be successful, it needs to accentuate the involvement of local communities, and promote sustenance of natural ecosystems. Communities must be viewed as equal partners. In this regard, WIOR countries must attempt to find ways through which there is a balance between economic development, local-community inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

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# Redefining Partnerships – Possible Minilateralism in the Western Indian Ocean

**Gulshan Sachdeva**

## Abstract

Traditionally, New Delhi has cooperated with East and South African countries (bordering the Indian Ocean) within the broader framework of South-South Cooperation. Now within the Indo-Pacific narrative and increasing Chinese influence in the region, India has increased its strategic engagement with the countries of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). This is reflected in commercial and development interactions and maritime security cooperation. The India-Africa summit meetings and Prime Minister Modi's Africa policy has further sharpened these engagements. This paper looks at India's bilateral and multilateral engagements and explores the scope for a minilateral involving India, UK and a few key countries from the region. The paper argues that existing India-UK triangular development cooperation interactions in the WIO could be extended to trade and commerce, infrastructure connectivity, and maritime cooperation in the form of a possible minilateral. Certain issues are already identified under the India-UK Roadmap 2030, which need to be extended to the WIO region. Once established, the minilateral cooperation could be extended to include like-minded partners.

## Introduction

Due to the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean within the context of the contemporary Indo-Pacific narrative, as well as India's traditional close ties with Africa, the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region has emerged as an important area of engagement for India. Many other powers, including China, are also active in the region. Most definitions of the WIO region include Comoros, French Indian Ocean territories (Mayotte and Reunion), Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania. Traditionally, India has mainly dealt bilaterally with countries in the WIO region within the broader policy of South-South Cooperation (SSC). More recent ties could also be explained within the context of India-Africa Forum Summits and the ten guiding principles of Prime Minister Modi's Africa policy. India also engages with the region through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). New Delhi has also cooperated with major powers like South Africa within Group of 20 (G20), Brazil- Russia- India- China-South Africa (BRICS), and India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA). Moreover, groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) also include states like Maldives, facilitating cooperation with India. As India occupies a key position in the Indian Ocean, it is keen to take on additional maritime responsibilities in the WIO. The region is vulnerable to piracy, radicalisation, and terrorism. Through maritime cooperation, New Delhi is also playing an important role in shaping the maritime security architecture in the WIO. This is done through anti-piracy patrols, bilateral maritime cooperation, and coordination with multilateral arrangements like the Djibouti Code of Conduct. India's major engagement with the WIO countries is also through capacity building programmes and lines of credit through development cooperation activities. In recent years, many development projects are also being implemented through triangular cooperation with the UK, US, and Japan. With the US, India is working in Kenya and Mozambique. A strong partnership is emerging with the UK in Kenya and Tanzania. With Japan, a broad understanding is developing through implementation of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. As there is limited engagement in the WIO region through minilateralism so far, this paper has looked at possibilities of minilateral cooperation in specific areas of action.

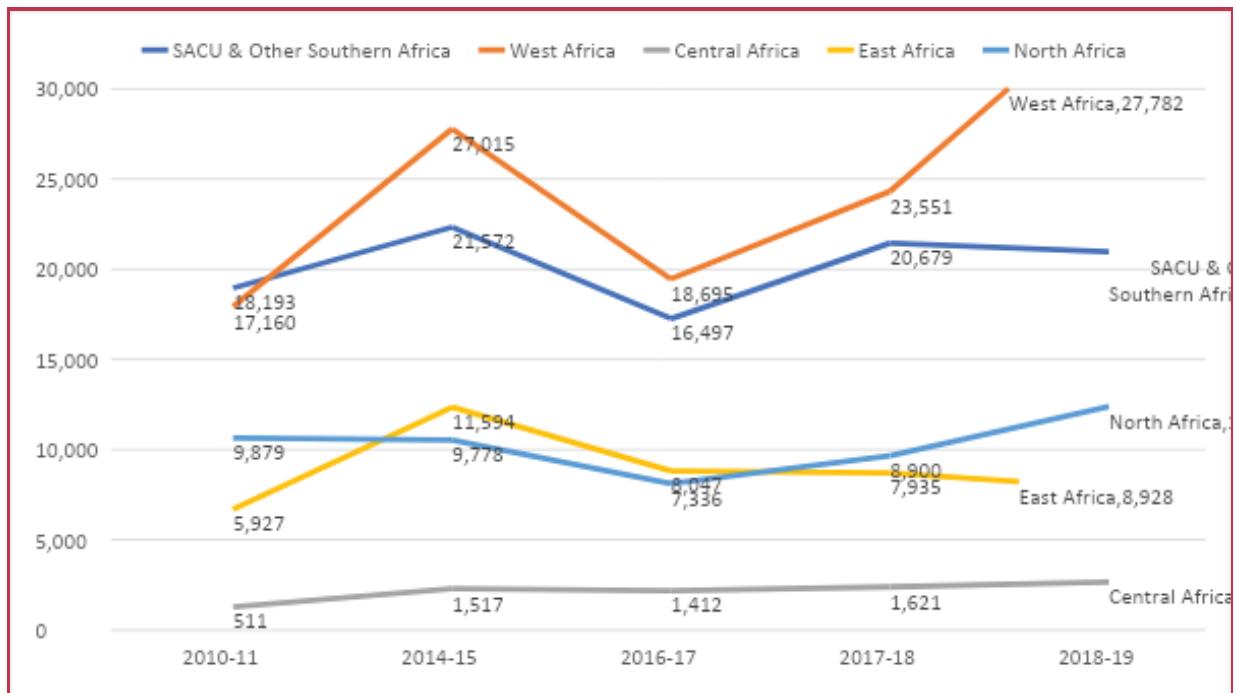
## Contextualising the WIO: India-Africa Ties and the Indo-Pacific Narrative

In recent years, the WIO region has become important for Indian strategic calculations. Its significance, however, needs to be situated within the broader India-Africa relations and contemporary narrative on the Indo-Pacific. The interplay of these two factors will help us understand current dynamics and possible new alignments in terms of new regional or minilateral engagements. New Delhi's historical, cultural, economic, and political linkages between India and Africa are well documented (Sharma, 2007; Taylor, 2012). India's historical role against colonialism, neo-colonialism, and apartheid further strengthened these bonds. Over decades, both have shared a common understanding on a large number of crucial global issues. In most cases, both have been on the same side in global negotiations to make the international economic order more equitable and friendly to the countries from the Global South. In the last three decades, particularly after the end of the Cold War, both India and Africa have changed significantly. Both have young populations, growing economies and a lot of development experiences to share. To a large extent, India-Africa economic development in the last few decades could be incorporated within the broader concept of South-South Cooperation (SSC).

Compared to earlier times, there has been remarkable growth performance in Africa in the last two decades. In the 1990s, average economic growth in Africa was slower than global growth and much lower than other developing countries. Growth in Africa has accelerated for the period between 2001 and 2008. It was about 6% per year, which was very close to fast growing developing countries in Asia and elsewhere. As a result of many factors including declining global growth and volatility in primary product prices, African growth for the period since 2009 has come down to about 3% per year. Although lower than India and other Asian developing countries, this is still slightly higher than the average global growth. Overall, Africa's in the last twenty years illustrates huge economic potential. To a significant extent, growth in the first decade of the 21st century resulted from high prices of primary products. However, many other sectors, including wholesale and retail trade, telecommunications, financial services, construction, etc. played an important role. A resurgent Africa has expressed its ambition through Agenda 2063 and its 15 flagship projects.

Africa with its recent growth history, young population, and plenty of success stories in agriculture, telecommunications, consumer markets, banking, etc. is much more confident today than any time in the recent past. Many of the fastest growing economies of the world are in Africa. When there are clear trends towards protectionism in the world, Africa has taken a bold step in the opposite direction by launching the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2019. Since almost every country in the continent is a member, this will be the largest free trade area in the world by number of countries. The idea is to create an Africa-wide market for goods and services, as well as promotion of movement of capital and people (Hartzenberg, 2019). Despite a large number of regional economic groupings within Africa, intra-regional trade is low. It is hoped that AfCFTA will promote higher trade and economies of scale for African companies. Within these changing dynamics, a new development partnership is being built between India and Africa. It is based on solid historical closeness as well as new economic dynamism in both Africa and India.

As a result of economic changes in Africa and India, bilateral trade has increased from about \$5.5 billion in 2001-02 to about \$70 billion in 2018-19. It increased to about \$52 billion in 2010-11 and peaked at about \$72 billion in 2014-15. This improvement in trade was also facilitated by introducing policies like the 'Focus Africa' programme by the Indian government in 2002. This was an initiative to improve trade and investment ties with Africa. Similarly, the India-Africa Summit initiative kicked off in 2008. In addition, the Duty Free Tariff Preferences (DFTP) initiative for Least Developing Countries (LDCs) by the Indian government also might have helped bilateral trade. The scheme is now extended to 98% of India's tariff lines and 38 African countries now benefit from the DFTP scheme. The trade with Africa is concentrated on a limited number of products. About three-fourth of African exports to India are natural resources and primary commodities. Similarly, about 40% of Indian exports are pharmaceuticals and refined petroleum products (Afreximbank and Exim India, 2018). The coastal Eastern and Southern African countries of the WIO region are becoming important trade partners. Western Africa has emerged as a major trading partner of India, mainly because of petroleum imports from Nigeria and gold from other countries. In the Southern region, including South African Customs Union (SACU) and other countries, South Africa is a major market for India. Trade with Eastern Africa has also improved. Major exports are pharmaceuticals, petroleum products and, vehicles. Imports include coal, metals, and vegetables. Main trading partners from the region include Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, Ethiopia and Mauritius (Sachdeva, 2020).



**Figure: India's Trade with Different African Regions, 2010-11 to 2018-19 (US\$ Millions)**  
 Source: Authors' calculations based on Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India Database

Apart from trade, investment linkages with Africa are also becoming stronger. And within India-Africa economic relations, the WIO region is playing a key role. Although Indian policy makers have emphasized success in this area at every forum, the real situation is rather complicated. The Ministry of External Affairs officials claim that "India has become the fifth largest investor in Africa with cumulative investments at over US\$54 billion" (Tirumurti, 2019). These figures are correct but the bulk of these investments are made in the WIO region, particularly in Mauritius. As Mauritius is a tax haven, a large part of this money is round tripped back to India (Chakrabarty, 2018). Between 2012 and 2016, Mauritius accounted for about 86% of total Indian FDI to Africa. Excluding Mauritius, only a few African countries have received large investments from a limited number of big public or private companies. A second major recipient is another WIO nation, Mozambique. This is due to large public sector investments by India in the oil, gas, and coal sector. The third important recipient is South Africa, another country from WIO. This is due to investments made by TATA group of companies in the hotel industry, steel, IT sector, and consumer goods (Chaudhry, Tomar and Joshi, 2018).

While looking at two-way investments from Africa, technically the WIO region is a major investor in India. In fact, for the period between April 2000 and June 2022, Mauritius was India's top investor with \$160 billion. This was 26% of total investments made in India during this period. Other important investors from the WIO were South Africa (about \$590 million), Seychelles (\$218 million), Mozambique (about \$16 million) (MOCI, 2022). So, the India-Africa investment story is basically an India-WIO investment story.

Although the concept of the Indo-Pacific is still evolving, it has already become a powerful narrative in the last few years. Diplomatically, countries are trying to define its relevance in various ways. Depending on national interests and strategic priorities, countries are defining the geographical boundaries of the Indo-Pacific.

However, the centrality of that narrative is to build coalitions, forums, platforms which can somehow balance the impact of a rising and assertive China. And India's role is crucial within this narrative. First, because of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is a key component of the Indo-Pacific construct and India plays an important role in it. Secondly, compared to other countries in the Quad or AUKUS, India is not an alliance partner of the United States. So far, the major focus of the narrative has been towards East and Southeast Asia, perhaps mainly because of concentration of actions to re-balance China. However, for India, the WIO part of the Indo-Pacific narrative is equally important. Through various strategies and announcements, Indian policy makers are also directing significant attention to the WIO part of the Indo-Pacific story.

## Infrastructure connectivity

Although the Indo-Pacific narrative has been dominated by strategic arrangements, the real competition is emerging in connectivity strategies. Despite the Chinese BRI dominating discussions in the last few years, there are many other important initiatives which are at different stages of implementation. Apart from the ASEAN connectivity plan, Japan, India, South Korea and other countries have their own designs. The EU announced its own Europe-Asia connectivity and Global Gateway strategy. The Quad nations have formed their own infrastructure partnership. The G7 and G20 have also outlined their principles for sustainable connectivity. The frameworks of these plans differ in terms of their origin, priorities, resource commitments and partnerships. All have strong Indo-Pacific or BRI dimensions.

Every major infrastructure project can be looked at from various perspectives. The developmental aspect clearly highlights the economic benefit of the project for participating countries. Historically, many regional infrastructure projects within their regional cooperation or regional integration frameworks in Europe and Asia were primarily advocated for, for their economic benefits. In the last two decades, however, many of these large infrastructural projects and their strategies have been monitored very closely through the prism of geopolitics. This has been clearly the case with the US' New Silk Road Strategy (NSRS), Russian dominated EAEU, and China-led BRI. Similarly, the BRI has been looked at primarily from a geopolitical perspective by India, United States, and other countries. As Russia-China bonhomie has grown, both are trying to integrate their infrastructure strategies. Similarly, the EU, Japan, and the United States are trying to build connectivity partnerships with like-minded countries, either bilaterally or through the G7 grouping.

Within the WIO region, geopolitics of maritime connectivity is becoming a major concern, particularly for India. The importance of the Indian Ocean for China has increased significantly in recent years due to its expanding trade, energy transport and investments. Sea lanes of communication running through Malacca Strait, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and South China Sea are important to China for its increasing energy and raw material needs. Indian Ocean littorals are also becoming important due to increasing investments by Chinese companies in the region as well as Chinese citizens living and working in these areas (US China Commission, 2016). For China, maritime expansion is also part of its strategy of economic integration with different regions of the Indo-Pacific with the Chinese economy (Sachdeva 2021). As a result, China has begun increasing its footprint in the Indian Ocean. Within South and Southeast Asia, it has made investments in strategic ports. However, it is not just South Asia but "nearly two-thirds of the world's 50 major ports are either owned by China or have received some Chinese investment" (Malik, 2018). China is also dispatching an increasing number of surface warships and submarines to the Indian Ocean region.

As commercial ports could be converted into military use, this Chinese “string of pearls” in South Asia has already troubled many Indian policy makers and analysts (Suri, 2017). India considers itself a leading player in the Indian Ocean and at present has a considerable advantage over China. Although a peaceful maritime environment in the WIO region is important for China’s economic expansion, this area may experience increasing competition from India and others. China, however, would like to project these investments as purely commercial ventures and would perhaps welcome further Indian investments in WIO ports which will improve its own regional connectivity.

Challenges emerging from Chinese maritime connectivity projects have pushed India to develop its own strategy. India has begun fortifying its “defences in the Indian Ocean by acquiring privileged access to bases in the Maldives, Mauritius, the Seychelles, Madagascar, Oman, and Iran; conduct joint naval exercises in the East and South China Seas; sign logistics exchange agreements with the United States, Singapore, and France to gain access to naval bases in the Indo-Pacific, and launch an ambitious naval expansion program” (Malik, 2018). In addition, it has upgraded its development cooperation programs with the littorals; and, to revive old cultural trade routes in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi also announced its own doctrine called SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

Although the US, Japan, and many European countries were always heavily involved in infrastructure projects financing, the BRI has brought many geopolitical worries into the spotlight. Dual use of infrastructure projects is always possible. Any port or airport can be used both for business as well as military purposes. These worries have also led to competing infrastructure strategies. BRI’s increasing profile is pushing many promoters of these plans in the Indo-Pacific to work out convergence strategies based on transparent behaviour, sustainable financing, and quality infrastructure. Japan is now partnering with the EU and India for sustainable connectivity and Asia-Africa Growth Corridor respectively. It has also agreed to work with the US and Australia. India has established a connectivity partnership with the EU.

As a response to the BRI, many official statements and speeches from the Quad nations as well as from the EU refer to global norms, financial responsibility, transparency, debt burdens, environmental sustainability and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, etc (MEA, 2017). These are all indirect references to Chinese infrastructure projects in the region. These issues are now routinely mentioned at all bilateral and multilateral meetings including at the G7 and G20. The EU has also started raising some of these concerns during its global engagements and has also come out with its own connectivity and Indo-Pacific strategies.

The Quad nations have been working together, or separately, to pursue their connectivity strategies, and in September 2021, formally launched a new “Quad infrastructure partnership”. Under the partnership, they have agreed to “cooperate to provide technical assistance, empowering regional partners with evaluative tools, and will promote sustainable infrastructure development”. This partnership also emphasized the “importance of supporting open, fair, and transparent lending practices in line with international rules and standards for major creditor countries, including on debt sustainability and accountability, and call on all creditors to adhere to these rules and standards” (The White House, 2021).

India’s various activities connected to maritime security in the WIO region will have to be synchronised with infrastructure connectivity. As outlined by Mishra (2019), India have developed various cooperation mechanisms with the WIO countries. These include Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), and Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC) in Madagascar. Similarly, bilaterally, India has developed significant cooperation maritime issues.

The cooperation is taking place in the form of anti-piracy patrol, training of naval personnel, defence officers, and civilian personnel engaged in maritime administration, conducting Hydrographic Surveys, and WIO nations developing basic capabilities in hydrography etc. Due to limited resource allocation, time overruns and weak coordination, the impact has been limited (for details see Mishra 2019). Moreover, India also collaborates with WIO nations through Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Since Chinese strategic activities in the region are also supported by its broader BRI projects, India also needs to link these activities with infrastructure connectivity projects. Since maritime infrastructure financing may involve significant resources, India may need to find like-minded partners to implement some of these projects in the WIO region.

The UK-India Roadmap 2030 (MEA 2021) has talked about exploring initiatives to “improve connectivity between India and the UK and seek synergies between our cooperation on connectivity projects with third countries including in the Indo-Pacific region”. Since both are busy negotiating bilateral trade agreement at the moment, no major connectivity initiative in any third country has been announced so far. The WIO region is certainly one area where India and the UK can work together in maritime connectivity or related fields.

#### India-WIO Development Partnership

Today, development partnership with African countries occupies an important position in Indian strategy and its external economic policy. To some extent, this might have been influenced by the growing Chinese profile in the region. Indian development partnership is clearly manifested through institutional mechanisms built over decades as well as specific development cooperation programmes, projects, and soft credit lines. These activities in India’s neighbourhood and Africa broadly appear within the framework of South-South Cooperation (SSC). The Indian development activities abroad broadly include lines of credit (LOCs), capacity-building programmes, and grant assistance projects. By March 2020, the EXIM Bank had signed 288 LOCs covering more than sixty countries in Africa, Asia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Latin America, with credit commitments of around US\$ 29.6 billion (India Exim Bank, 2019). A large number of these LOCs are with African countries. Within the WIO region, the Indian government has provided LOCs worth about US\$ 5 billion so far. Major LOC recipient countries in the WIO region include Maldives (\$1330 million), Tanzania (\$1115 million) Mauritius (\$954 million), Mozambique (\$772 million), Kenya (\$206 million), Comoros (\$42 million) and Seychelles (\$16 million) (Exim Bank Database, n.d.). Another \$500 million LOCs are under negotiation. These include a \$300 million metro project in Mauritius, \$100 million defence related projects in Madagascar, and \$100 million for upgradation projects in Maldives. In recent years, India has also initiated triangular cooperation with other partners in Africa. In partnership with the US, India has agreed to work jointly in agriculture related projects in Botswana, DR Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia (USAID, n.d.). With Japan, India has initiated an infrastructural project called Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The AAGC will work through development cooperation projects, quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity, enhancing capacities, and people to people partnership. The project will be aligned with development priorities of African countries. The priority projects will be in the areas of health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture, disaster management and skill development and connectivity. Similar triangular projects are also being explored with the EU. Some have argued that individual member states of the EU like Germany could also work with India on triangular projects in Africa (Wagner, 2019).

Traditionally, India used to be a very important recipient of British aid. This relationship is totally transformed now. In the last two decades, this relationship has grown into global partnerships for development, particularly in Africa. In recent years, the UK government agencies have supported many of the triangular projects implemented through the Indian government, civil society, or the private sector.

To institutionalise many of these actions, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and DFID signed the “Statement of Intent on Partnership for Cooperation in Third Countries” in 2015. Some of the major initiatives include DFID-TERI Partnership (2011-15), Knowledge Partnership Programme (2012-16), Strategic Health and Nutrition Partnership (2013-18), Innovative Ventures and Technologies for Development (2013-19), Global Research Partnership on Food and Nutrition Security, Health & Women (2013-20), and Supporting Indian Trade and Investment for Africa (SITA Africa, 2014-2020). Some of these projects were also implemented in the WIO region, including in Kenya and Tanzania (For details see Mittal, 2020 and Paulo 2018).

## Possible Minilateralism in the WIO

The world, after the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, may be a different place altogether. The world order was already in transition. These two developments have accelerated this change. The western world order under the leadership of the United States is already weakened. China is expanding and asserting. Many European nations are talking about strategic autonomy. Similarly, India’s hope for an alternative norm building through BRICS is low today. However, suspicions about Beijing are also growing. Multilateral institutions including the WHO, WTO and the UN, have proved less effective during the pandemic, trade tensions, and Ukraine war. Due to limited effectiveness of regional and multilateral institutions, there has been a rise of minilateral institutions. These smaller groups have an advantage over broader regional and multilateral forums due to focused agendas and limited memberships featuring like-minded states (Singh and Teo 2020). Similar to many other countries, India has also started using minilateral engagements as part of its foreign policy toolbox.

The Indo-Pacific region has seen the establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad); Australia-France-India trilateral ministerial dialogue; Australia, India and Indonesia trilateral; Malabar naval exercises; and the Australia, UK and the USA (AUKUS). These minilaterals deal not just with security related matters but also issues like climate change, supply chain resilience, infrastructure, critical technologies and health issues (Rajagopalan 2021). This has clearly been the case with the Quad. In an attempt to re-balance China’s assertive rise, the focus of these groupings has been mainly East and SouthEast Asia. There is, however, relatively less activity of a similar nature in the WIO region. Since India’s security and economic interests are clearly linked with the WIO region, it has improved its bilateral engagements significantly. It also has a strong strategic partnership with South Africa. Besides, wherever possible, it has aligned its activities with multilateral agencies. Due to the strong Chinese and Russian presence, objectives of BRICS grouping may be entirely different from the objectives of the Indo-Pacific narrative. The IBSA grouping works within the broader context of South-South Cooperation but not directed towards any particular region of the world.

Since the WIO region is becoming important, India may like to work with like-minded partners in specific areas of cooperation in the region. As India’s foreign policy now follows a multi-alignment format, it is ready to work with different sets of players in various parts of the world. Going by the activities of recent years, there is potential to work towards a few minilaterals involving India, France, South Africa, Mauritius, Maldives, Kenya, Tanzania, Japan, UK, and US.

A large number of bilateral and multilateral activities in the area of maritime security are already happening in the WIO region. There is already certain bilateral and multilateral institutional framework in operation in the area of counter piracy operations. It may not be easy to formulate a superior minilateral format involving India, UK, France and one or two key countries like Somalia. However, in case of maritime capacity building, a minilateral format could provide some extra benefits.



The other area in which a minilateral setting could be useful is development cooperation. So far, most of the development assistance programmes are either bilateral or triangular cooperation in which normally a country from the North partners with a Southern country to implement projects in a developing country. As mentioned earlier, India has already started this kind of cooperation with the UK and the USA in some of the countries in the WIO. An imaginative minilateral involving say India, South Africa, UK, France as well as specific WIO countries could be formed. This will be an interesting combination of countries working together to achieve larger SDG goals in the WIO. India and the UK have already established a strong cooperation in this area including in some of the WIO countries.

An Infrastructure connectivity minilateral could be another useful way of countries working together in the WIO. In the emerging Indo-Pacific economic architecture, almost every important country in the region has its own connectivity plans, either individually or part of multilateral frameworks. Within the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, these connectivity strategies have also become an important part of national or regional strategies. This kind of initiative could also provide some alternatives to the WIO countries which are attracted by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Broadly India has been working with the European Union through connectivity partnership, and with Japan through Asia Africa Growth Corridor. The Quad nations have formed their own infrastructure partnership. The G7 and G20 have also outlined their principles for sustainable connectivity. Within the WIO, an imaginative infrastructure minilateral could be formed between India, UK, France, Mauritius, Maldives, etc. Due to the geographical location within the Indian Ocean, immediate focus is likely to be ports, special economic zones, and other maritime infrastructure.

India, UK and certain WIO countries could also concentrate on health and education matters. India and UK have successfully collaborated in vaccine development and both have provided vaccines to many of the countries in the region. A large number of students from the WIO countries are also attracted towards UK and India.

Many of the issues discussed above are cross-cutting. For example, development cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, and maritime capacity building cannot be discussed in isolation. So, it might be useful to identify potential countries and many of these issues could be put together on the minilateral agenda. Overall, the minilaterals in the WIO could be formed in three different ways. In the first category, India and the UK could work out specific issues with key countries where they have strong historical linkages like Kenya, Maldives, Mauritius, and South Africa. In the second category India, UK and France could work out within a more extended circle. A larger minilateral for a particular sector like infrastructure connectivity could also be worked with other like-minded countries like Japan and the USA.

## Conclusion

Within the Indo-Pacific narrative and China's increasing influence in India's neighbourhood, the WIO region has emerged as an important area of strategic engagement for New Delhi. Historically, India has dealt with East and South African countries bordering the Indian Ocean within the broader framework of South-South Cooperation. The India-Africa summit meetings and Prime Minister Modi's Africa policy has sharpened these engagements. Some of these interactions have happened through IORA, G20, BRICS, IBSA and SAARC. As maritime security cooperation has become an important area of concern, India has upgraded bilateral maritime cooperation with almost all WIO countries and also started participating in multilateral initiatives. It has also developed cooperation mechanisms with CMF, CGPCS, DCoC and RMIFC. Similar to the Southeast and East Asian part of the Indo-Pacific, there is also a need for certain minilateral arrangements in the WIO in specific areas viz. maritime security cooperation, physical infrastructure, development cooperation, and health and people contacts. Most of these issues have been identified under the India-UK Roadmap 2030. Both are already working together in the area of development cooperation through triangular cooperation in some of the countries in the WIO region. By bringing maritime security and infrastructure connectivity into India-UK cooperation in the WIO region, the scope can be widened. While working with South Africa, Kenya, Mauritius and Tanzania, this could become an important minilateral in the WIO region of the Indo-Pacific. The scope can be further widened by expanding partnerships to include France and Japan. The coming together of these powers will provide the grouping with legitimacy, resources, and geopolitical endorsement.

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# East of Suez but West of India – Testing the UK’s Potential in the Western Indian Ocean

**Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Simran Brookes\***

## Introduction

This is an opportune time to strengthen and expand UK-India naval and maritime security ties in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), the area that stretches from the southern and eastern coasts of Africa to the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf region, Iran, Pakistan, the western and southern Indian coasts, as well as the islands of the central Indian Ocean.

Although the WIO sub-region is largely a UK-construct, with India’s preference for a wider Indian Ocean/Indo-Pacific perspective, it is the operational Area of Responsibility (AOR) for India’s Mumbai-based Western Naval Command, with its Western Fleet known as the “sword-arm” of the navy<sup>1</sup>.

Both UK and India have shared economic interests and security concerns, growing military presence and capabilities, and converging apprehensions over China’s evolving presence in the region. In order to boost UK-India ties in this region, both governments and navies need to come up with ‘imaginative’ policy-initiatives and ‘pro-active’ implementation of naval and maritime cooperative measures.

The UK’s post-Brexit policy has begun to chart its ambition of a ‘Global Britain’, focused on building new and strong partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for both prosperity and security. India is a key partner in this endeavour.

The UK’s Integrated Review (IR)—its first comprehensive (111-page) review of defence, security, development and foreign policy since the Cold War (titled ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age’) (16 March 2021)—formally introduced its ‘tilt’ to the Indo-Pacific region<sup>2</sup>. It recognised India as one of the three most important powers in the region (along with China and Japan)<sup>3</sup>, “the largest democracy in the world” and as an “international actor of growing importance”<sup>4</sup>.

The IR stated that the UK’s objective towards India was to “transform bilateral cooperation over the next ten years across the full range of bilateral shared interests”<sup>5</sup>. The subsequent 69-page UK Defence Command Paper (DCP) (titled ‘Defence in a Competitive Age’) (22 March 2021) went further by describing India as “a key pillar” of its regional approach<sup>6</sup>. This new UK outreach to India, highlighting India’s importance as an international actor within the broader geographical construct of the Indo-Pacific (rather than the traditional confines of South Asia), was welcomed by New Delhi; no other country had been accorded such an ambitious agenda by the UK<sup>7</sup>.

In response, India made it clear that it sought engagement with the UK after having waited nearly four years for it to overcome its domestic political wrangling over Brexit (declared on 31 January 2020) and 're-emerge' in the Indo-Pacific<sup>8</sup>. In March 2019, the visiting Indian Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sunil Lanba welcomed the "increased focus of the Royal Navy to the Indian Ocean region"<sup>9</sup>.

In May 2021, the unique India-UK Roadmap to 2030, the first of its kind for both countries, was released by prime ministers Boris Johnson and Narendra Modi. It highlighted 'defence and security' as one of five 'pillars' for cooperation in the next ten years. Both prime ministers also publicly sought a 'quantum leap' in their bilateral ties. Modi's visit to Glasgow in November 2021 for the COP26 Summit signalled India's new interest in strengthening ties with the UK. This was reciprocated by Johnson's visit to India in April 2022, where strong personal dynamics between the two prime ministers was on display, despite their political divergences over the Russia-Ukraine war. Defence issues and a prospective trade deal were prioritised during Johnson's visit to India.

These developments took place amid converging British and Indian perspectives on China. The UK has changed its view on China—from its 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review which sought to "build a deeper partnership", amidst the rhetoric of a Sino-UK 'golden era' during the David Cameron and Theresa May premierships—to one of strong public criticism and suspicion. This is the result of China's enactment and imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in June 2020, the persecution of China's Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province, and its assertive policies and practices in the South China Sea. In late 2021, in his first public speech that took place at the IISS, the Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) pointedly noted that China was his service's "single greatest priority".

India's deadly border clash with China on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh in June 2020, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed for the first time in 45 years, has led to heightened tensions with China and a worsening of bilateral ties. At that time, the UK government expressed strong concern over Chinese actions against India. In the House of Commons, concerns were also raised over China's "bullying behaviour" on the border dispute with India.

In a surprise announcement on 15 September 2021, Australia, the UK and the US said they had formed AUKUS, a new minilateral defence and security pact. New Delhi – which received prior notice of the announcement from Australia – greeted news of the partnership coolly and with mixed feelings. On the one hand, AUKUS served as a clear signal that London was taking China seriously as a security threat. India's security establishment had noted that the UK's IR had described China as the "biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security" while simultaneously calling for increased engagement with Beijing. But the fact that the UK had now made a long-term commitment to increasing Australia's military capabilities served to allay concerns in New Delhi that a post-Brexit UK might seek a return to the so-called 'golden era' of cooperative Sino-British relations declared in the middle of the last decade by former UK chancellor George Osborne.

On the other hand, India remains concerned that AUKUS could have negative security consequences, detract from the significance of the 'Quad' (a non-military grouping among India, the US, Australia and Japan), and weaken the security partnership of the AUKUS countries with France. New Delhi was concerned the trilateral partnership may lead to an increase in the number of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) operating in the eastern Indian Ocean from the 2030s onwards, an issue aggravated by the fact that the Indian navy would like to acquire these types of vessels but had not received political approval to do so. Despite India's apprehension that AUKUS would overshadow the 'Quad', Japan, its other onlooking member, praised the move and said that AUKUS would be a venue for 'strengthening engagement in the Indo-Pacific region'. But, ties between the AUKUS countries and France – India's strongest defence and security partner in Europe – became deeply strained, resulting in France's withdrawal from the second trilateral meeting with the Australian and Indian foreign ministers.

Currently, UK-India naval and maritime security cooperation includes: naval joint exercises and port visits by each other's warships; UK participation in India's largest multilateral naval exercise MILAN and a new IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium)-series of naval exercises; exchange of officer students to defence and service academies; the inclusion of a UK Naval Officer at the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR); the establishment of an annual maritime dialogue; and, a Carrier Capability Partnership aimed at developing "joint capabilities and assisting India's carrier programme".

During Johnson's visit to India in April 2022, a Joint Working Group on India-UK Electric Propulsion Capability Partnership was announced to develop military and industrial collaboration in maritime electric propulsion systems. Modi indicated that the UK had invited India to participate in its aviation and naval shipbuilding programmes. The UK provided an India-specific Open General Export Licence (OGEL) for the export of equipment and emerging technologies, aimed to "reduce bureaucracy and shorten delivery times". This will likely improve the efficiency of UK-India joint-research, co-design, co-development and co-production of defence technology and systems, complementing the finalisation of a Letter of Arrangement between the UK's Defence Science & Technology Laboratory (DSTL) and India's Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) to help deliver advanced security capabilities, through joint effort and collaboration, in key and emerging military technologies.

## Western Indian Ocean

In relation to the Indian Ocean, the IR seeks "enhanced defence cooperation that brings a more secure Indian Ocean Region"; and the DCP states that the UK "will establish a maritime partnership with India in support of mutual security objectives in the Indian Ocean". Since the signing of the 2030 Roadmap, the UK and India have sought to enhance maritime cooperation through a Western Indian Ocean Partnership.

Both countries are dependent on the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) for energy and trade flows in the WIO, amidst shared traditional and non-traditional security concerns, which include: piracy; narcotics and arms smuggling; radicalisation and terrorism; illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and environmental security/climate change; along with sub-regional/regional and great power rivalries and challenges.

For India, the WIO is a primary area of security concern and diplomatic opportunity. Pakistan remains a principal military threat; the source of the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai; and piracy challenges off the Aden coast. At the same time, security ties with the Gulf region are strengthening; it is home to the second (UAE, 3.1 million) and fourth (Saudi Arabia, 2.8 million) largest number of overseas Indians; and a key region for the Indian navy to highlight its role as a 'preferred security partner' for littoral and island states.

China's presence and influence in the WIO is also fast-evolving. It opened its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017, within the Chinese-run Doraleh port, and has port infrastructure investments in Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania and Sri Lanka. These could be used to pre-position logistics support for naval deployments in the area. In late 2021, the US halted the construction of a secret Chinese military facility at the commercial Khalifa port in the UAE.

India's strong naval and maritime security ties with Mauritius (where 70% of the population is of Indian origin), and Seychelles remain key to its military presence in the WIO; it has significant defence cooperation agreements with Seychelles since 2003 and Mauritius since 2015. The latter agreement provides for the setting up and upgradation of "infrastructure for improving sea and air connectivity at the Outer Island of Mauritius", and enhancing "the capabilities of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the Outer Island." Following this agreement, India is actively constructing a new airport (capable of hosting the Indian Navy's new Boeing P-8I maritime patrol aircraft), new port, and logistics and communication facilities on the remote North Agalega island of Mauritius. In 2016, the first ever overseas visit by an Indian Defence Minister was made to Mauritius. In February 2020, India provided its third defence-related Line of Credit (LoC) to Mauritius; and has provided Mauritius and Seychelles with Dornier maritime patrol aircraft, coast-guard ships, and helicopters. India has also supplied coastal radar surveillance systems to Mauritius and Seychelles as part of its efforts to boost regional maritime domain awareness and maritime security. In the Seychelles, India has launched a coastal-surveillance radar project. It also conducts joint EEZ surveillance with the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles, as well as coordinated anti-piracy and air surveillance patrols, and engages in hydrographic cooperation with Kenya, Mozambique, Oman, South Africa and Tanzania. Additionally, the largest naval ship in Mauritius is an Indian-built offshore patrol vessel; India has also provided arms and military equipment to Mozambique, Maldives and Comoros.

India has been associated with the establishment of defence institutions in Ethiopia and Tanzania; Indian military training teams have worked with their counterparts in Tanzania, Mauritius and Seychelles. The Indian navy provided assistance to cyclone-hit Mozambique in 2019 (Operation Sahayata) and provided relief to flood victims in Madagascar in 2020 (Operation Vanilla). Since 2006, India also has a defence cooperation agreement with Mozambique. The first-ever India Africa Defence Ministers Conclave (IADMC) was held in Lucknow, in conjunction with DefExpo in February 2020. In February 2021, India hosted the first Defence Ministers Conclave (DMC) of the IOR on the side-lines of the Aero-India show and exhibition in Bengaluru in a hybrid manner, including the participation of the defence ministers of Comoros and Madagascar. The third Goa Maritime Conclave in November 2021 brought together navy/coast guard/military/police chiefs of nine countries, including Comoros, Malagasy, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles.

India has carried out anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008, with an Indian Navy ship deployed continuously since. In its first five years, the Indian Navy reportedly captured 100 pirates and foiled over 40 piracy attempts and according to the India Navy, by the end of September 2017, it had safely escorted 3,784 merchant ships in the region. The Indian Navy's anti-piracy patrols are supported by Oman, with its ships using Salalah for operational turn arounds to sustain their deployment.

India's defence and security ties with Oman are its strongest in the Gulf, along with those it has with the UAE. India and Oman have carried out joint naval exercises since 1993 and joint air exercises since 2009. Since an MoU on defence cooperation was signed in December 2005, the Indian Navy has increased its visits to Oman. Royal Navy of Oman sailors have travelled to India for training in hydrography, diving, and dockyard management, and in 2010, defence minister A.K. Antony travelled to Oman for a rare overseas visit. India and the UAE signed a defence cooperation MoU in 2003. Since then, regular high-level exchanges between services chiefs, port calls by ships of both navies, joint naval exercises and the first India-UAE joint air-force exercise in September 2008 have taken place. In November 2008, India for the first time signed a maritime-focused defence cooperation agreement with Qatar and in February 2014, India signed a defence cooperation agreement, involving greater information exchange and training with Saudi Arabia. Regular Indian naval ship deployments take place in this region.



# 9 Ways UK-India ties in the WIO can be strengthened

## 1. Expansion of Naval Exercises

The UK and India need to do far more in terms of naval exercises. The 15th edition of the annual bilateral Konkan-series of naval exercises took place in August 2021 in the English Channel; this exercise, established in 2004, is held alternately off the coasts of India and UK. However, this exercise was limited to one warship on each side.

The maiden visit of the UK's new Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier and its strike group to the Indo-Pacific provided an opportunity for a two-day bilateral passage exercise with the Indian navy in July 2021 in the eastern Indian Ocean, as well as the first bilateral tri-service exercise in the WIO in October 2021. The latter made the UK only the third country with which India has conducted a bilateral tri-service exercise (it has held the INDRA tri-service with Russia in 2017 and 2019, and the Tiger Triumph exercise with the US in 2019).

But, the Indian aircraft carrier Vikramaditya did not participate in these exercises as it was undergoing refit at an Indian dockyard; and the deployment of a British aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean on an annual basis appears unlikely. As a result, the Konkan-series needs to be expanded and made more complex; greater joint sea-time and increased port calls are required.

Currently, the UK is notable for its absence in any of India's multiple trilateral naval exercises. Greater trust and confidence needs to be built into UK-India naval interactions to enable trilateral naval exercises among the UK, India and the US/France/Australia/Japan. Engagement with the Malabar-series of naval exercises (with India, US, Australia and Japan) should also be pursued; media reports that such an exercise had taken place in October 2021 were incorrect.

Could a new 'quadrilateral' naval exercise be set up among the UK, India, US and France, despite the recent formation of AUKUS, comprising all three western permanent members of the UN Security Council? At the same time, India should seek to be involved in the UK-led Joint Warrior-series of multilateral naval exercises (Europe's largest military exercise) that predominantly takes place in the UK's surrounding maritime and airspace; perhaps, through initially sending Observers; especially, as this series of exercises is similar to the US-led RIMPAC (the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise), in which India has been participating since 2014 (having previously attended as an observer in 2006, 2010 and 2012). India is the only Quad country not to be involved in both RIMPAC and Joint Warrior-exercises.

## 2. New Training MoU

A new Joint UK-India training MoU is being finalised, to be signed at the next meeting of the defence ministers of UK and India. This is important, as it provides an over-arching structure on joint training for the two armed forces, including navy-to-navy cooperation. It also seeks to raise the level of training from student officers in each other's defence academies to an exchange of directing staff; a positive development in building and enhancing mutual trust. The Training MoU could also provide shared UK-India training in Kenya and Oman, two of the UK's five 'permanent points of presence' in the WIO.

### **3. Deepening Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)**

UK and India need to do more together on MDA and information sharing, following the deployment of a Royal Navy officer to India's IFC-IOR in Gurugram, near New Delhi, in June 2021. This could include more exchanges and interactions with the UK's National Maritime Information Centre (NMIC), and, in due course, possibly, the reciprocal placement of an Indian navy officer at the NMIC in Portsmouth.

The NMIC is a multi-department and agency effort including the involvement of the armed forces, the National Crime Agency, and international partnerships. According to the UK National Strategy for Maritime Security, published in 2014, the Centre "incorporates additional global information to provide the UK with unified situational awareness of maritime activity in UK and international waters" and "provides real-time information to assess the impact of maritime activity to the UK and contribute to decision making." One of the NMIC's roles is to "act as a national focal point for regional and international partners on maritime domain awareness". The Strategy also outlined that the UK would "share situational information, harmonise future regional and international maritime domain awareness initiatives", through the framework of the NMIC.

The UK and India are also seeking to expand their information sharing cooperation on Dark and Grey Shipping, identified as an objective of the 2030 Roadmap and raised again in their April 2022 joint statement. The latter called for "early conclusion of the Maritime Information Exchange Arrangement on dark and grey shipping". This Arrangement is also expected to be signed at the next meeting of the two defence ministers. This would improve cooperation tracking and communicating on foreign or illegal maritime activities. There could also be maritime and naval-related cooperation on space, artificial intelligence, and cyber security.

### **4. Prospects for Cooperation from Duqm base in Oman**

Since 2018, the UK has hosted a logistics support base in Oman's strategic port of Duqm. This is expanding to 'triple' its existing size, following a \$30.5 million investment. The UK seeks to conduct joint force training in both Duqm and Ras Madrakah in Oman. According to the then First Sea Lord (and now Chief of Defence Staff), Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, the UK's new Littoral Response Group (South) seeks, to "operate out of Duqm and reach across to India (*italics added by authors*), reach across to Diego Garcia, be able to contribute along the coast of the east side of Africa".

The British and Indian navies have been given much-valued privileged port access at Duqm. Both navies could conduct joint bilateral naval exercises (or a trilateral naval exercise with the US Navy) from Duqm as well as coordinated patrols to improve the safety and security of shipping, including anti-piracy measures; there could also be joint programmes for capacity-building and training of Omani/Gulf naval forces.

### **5. Prospect for Joint Operations in the Arabian Gulf region**

In April 2022, during the US-India 2+2 Dialogue, it was announced that India would become an associate member of the Combined Maritime Forces – a multinational maritime partnership which "exists to uphold the rules-based international order" and "promote security, stability and prosperity" by "countering illegal non-state actors". This is a hugely positive step by the Modi government, with previous governments avoiding such an association over concerns about antagonising Iran, a target of the CMF.

The focus areas of the CMF include counter-narcotics, counter-smuggling, combatting piracy, encouraging regional cooperation, and promoting a safe maritime environment. The CMF is comprised of four task forces (CTF 150 – Maritime Security Operations in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean, CTF 151 – Counter Piracy, CTF 152 – Maritime Security Operations inside the Arabian Gulf and CTF 153 – Maritime Security in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden) all located at the US Naval Support Activity in Bahrain.

While the UK occupies a leadership role as a member of the coalition with a one-star Commodore assuming the position of Deputy Commander of the CMF, India independently deploys naval ships alongside CTF 151 and European Union Naval Force Somalia to patrol the Maritime Security Transit Corridor.

India's membership now creates the prospect to expand bilateral (and multilateral) cooperation with the UK, including on joint operations to address non-state maritime threats; in due course, India could also seek a leadership role, on a rotational basis, of one of the CTFs, possibly CTF 151 as a continuation of its anti-piracy efforts.

## **6. Building cooperation on IONS and IORA**

Despite considerable political controversy, UK sovereignty over BIOT provides the UK with full membership of the Indian Navy-initiated IONS (since 2008) which "seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region". This provides the UK a key forum to further enhance security cooperation with India in the WIO.

In March 2022, the inaugural IONS Maritime Exercise (IMEX-22) took place to "enhance interoperability in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations among member navies." The navies of India, France, Iran and Bangladesh participated in the exercise with observers from fifteen IONS member navies, including from the UK, who participated, as well.

The UK is also a dialogue partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the single 'permanent' inter-governmental ocean-wide organisation for cooperation, with Headquarters in Mauritius. India is a founding-member of IORA. This also provides opportunities for bilateral diplomacy and mutual cooperation on Indian Ocean matters.

In April 2022, it was announced that the UK had joined the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) this year, following an agreement made at their virtual summit on 4th May 2021 to 'explore the potential for cooperation' within this framework. The IPOI is a 'cooperative effort' launched by Prime Minister Modi at the East Asia Summit November 2019 with the purpose to 'create a safe, secure and stable maritime domain' and built on seven key pillars. The UK will co-lead the Maritime Security Pillar, which India had previously also agreed to lead on, and "promote regional coordination and cooperation for securing and protecting the Indo-Pacific maritime domain."

The UK and India could cooperate and coordinate to seek enhanced institutional connectivity and convergences between the IORA and the IONS in relation to maritime safety and security; such cooperation is notable for its absence. Maritime safety and security is one of six priority areas of the IORA, while the IONS has a maritime security/HADR working group. MDA is another key issue for prospective cooperation, alongside maritime counter-terrorism cooperation and coordination.

## **7. India to adopt a 'security-first approach' towards BIOT**

There continues to be considerable political controversy over the UK's continued sovereignty over BIOT, with Diego Garcia leased to the US for the joint UK-US military base. This base supports regional counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism operations, and provides unique opportunities for MDA. Tellingly, neither the IR nor the DCP specifically mention Diego Garcia despite its recognised critical strategic value for the UK's security interests in the Western Indian Ocean and beyond (although the latter noted that the UK would "guarantee our regional access through existing bases, including the British Indian Ocean Territory"). In fact, despite the UK's much vaunted 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific', little detail has been given to the role Diego Garcia will play.

Last year, then-First Sea Lord, Admiral Radakin had indicated the Royal Navy will "use our territory in the middle of the Indian Ocean...in Diego Garcia and reach down to – east Africa" , as part of its planned increased naval presence in the Indo-Pacific and cooperation with its regional partners.

In view of its long-standing support for de-colonisation, India firmly supports Mauritius in its quest for the restoration of sovereignty over Diego Garcia. As a result, India has consistently voted against the UK on this issue in the United Nations. But, at the same time, India's concerns over the expansion of Chinese naval presence and influence in the Indian Ocean has intensified. As a result, speaking at UN votes on the issue, India's Permanent Representative acknowledged the need for "collective commitment towards ensuring the security and prosperity of our oceanic space" but considered it "a separate matter" to the decolonisation question.

In view of the unlikely possibility of India changing its diplomatic stand on Diego Garcia, it could adopt a 'security-first' approach to benefit from the advantages of Diego Garcia's strategic location in the centre of the Indian Ocean and bordering all its major shipping lanes and its role as a refuelling, resupply and repair location. This could 'leverage' the advantages that the strategic location of BIOT/Diego Garcia provides from a 'security-first' perspective—without compromising on its political opposition to the UK in this regard—in order to jointly ensure the safety and security of shipping in the area. Indian air access to Diego Garcia could be key in this endeavour. This could also be leveraged to develop joint MDA and intelligence and information capabilities across the WIO.

## **8. New Defence Logistics MoU**

The UK and India have been working on a Defence Logistics MoU since 2020. This was pledged in the 2030 Roadmap in May 2021 and the UK-India joint statement during Johnson's visit in April 2022. This MoU is now finalised and will be signed at the next meeting of the two defence ministers.

This would serve to extend India's strategic and naval operational reach in the Indian Ocean and beyond. It provides for reciprocal access to each other's military facilities and ports for the docking of warships for refuelling and replenishment of provisions. It potentially allows for UK access to Indian facilities and bases and Indian access to UK's facilities including the UK-US Naval Support Facility at Diego Garcia (although 'third-party' use of the base requires US approval as well, as agreed to under the Exchange of Notes agreements between the UK and US Governments which sets out regulations concerning the use of BIOT for defence purposes). According to the supplementary 1976 agreement, "ships and aircraft owned or operated by or on behalf of a third government and the personnel of such ships and aircraft, may only use such of the services provided by the facility, and on such terms, as may be agreed in any particular case by the two Governments."

But, this does not mean automatic or reciprocal access by the UK and India to each other's military facilities; each request requires additional approvals, including, at times, political authorisation. But, importantly, the defence logistics MoU provides an over-arching structure to help ease the

implementation of such individual requests. In this context, India has signed multiple logistics support agreements with the US, Australia, Japan, France, South Korea and Singapore; and is reportedly working on logistics agreements with Russia and Vietnam.

Also, the defence logistics MoU could serve a key objective of India's defence policy of becoming *Atmanirbhar Bharat* ('self-reliant India') in defence. This could take place through repair and maintenance work carried out on UK warships in Indian shipyards, thereby also building mutual trust and confidence.

## 9. Mutual consultation on Indian Ocean matters

Until recently, UK and India lacked an effective mechanism for mutual consultation on the Indian Ocean; a 2015 proposal for a "new annual senior official dialogue on South Asia, including maritime issues" did not work out. Such consultations could have involved joint HADR operations towards island states such as the Maldives, where the UK recently established a diplomatic mission, thereby providing 'value-add' to India's 'preferred partnerships'.

But, in their 2030 Roadmap, the UK and India pledged to "improve maritime cooperation through a partnership in the Western Indian Ocean, with a new Maritime Dialogue". The first such dialogue took place in October 2021, led by the UK's Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

## Conclusion

The WIO is the principal sub-region of the Indian Ocean where the prospects and impact of UK-India naval and maritime security cooperation can be maximised. Both countries have shared interests, growing military presence and capabilities, and converging evolving security concerns.

A 'first step' would be to formally sign-off on three new key documents on defence logistics, dark and grey shipping, and training; all three awaiting the next meeting between the UK and Indian defence ministers. The UK-India joint statement of April 2022 indicated "the convening this year of the Defence Ministerial Dialogue, which would be an important step to ensure that all the necessary framework agreements are in place". This is likely to take place in the next few months with the prospective visit of India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, to the UK. A scheduled visit, due to take place in July 2022, to mark the first Indian Cabinet-level Defence Minister's visit to the UK in 20 years, was cancelled at the last minute due to protocol issues, but a visit by the UK's National Security Advisor to New Delhi took place two weeks later and followed India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to London after COP26. Discussions during the latter meeting reportedly covered maritime issues and the Indo-Pacific. A substantive Indian Defence Ministerial visit to the UK would pave the path towards "mechanisms for operational co-ordination" in the WIO, as indicated in the 2030 Roadmap and the April 2022 Joint Statement. This could, in time, lead to a new '2+2' Foreign and Defence Ministers dialogue between the UK and India.

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