

An EU-India Partnership with IOR Island States: The Way-Ahead

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Introduction

The economic rise of Asian nation-states has led to the shifting of the geopolitical centre of the world eastwards. In the maritime domain, it almost certainly lies between the Pacific and the Atlantic, south of the Eurasian landmass. Consequently, the Indian Ocean and the island states therein have gained prominence. Located close to vital SLOCs, the importance of these States cannot be overstated. That said, however, the strategic location of these islets has frequently overshadowed the interests of their inhabitants, at least in the minds of policy makers of larger States.

Today, we see a renewed vigour in the Ministry of External affairs in New Delhi to engage with the island States of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This was evident recently, when Prime Minister Modi visited Maldives and Sri Lanka, almost immediately after his re-election in 2019.¹ However, perhaps it is China that must be credited with providing renewed urgency to this Indian interest. The inroads that Beijing has made in accessing and influencing the leadership in these island States has forced the Government of India to reassess its policies. On the other hand, this has only highlighted the concern among the local populations in these States that they are mere pawns in a larger geopolitical contest.

European States prior to 1993 and, later, the European Union, have similarly been lackadaisical in engaging with the island States of the IOR. In addition to the uncomfortably large distance from Europe (the tyranny of geography), the continental regions closest to these island States, namely South Asia and East Africa, have themselves been economic laggards on a global scale. As a result, Europe has had limited interaction and interest in the entirety of the IOR.

Recently, however, the rise of China has necessitated renewed focus in the region, leading to the promulgation of Indo-Pacific strategies by various States. Germany is the latest country to do so.² However, China, the US, Japan, and ASEAN as a collective, already have a head-start when compared to the EU. Moreover, Japan, India, Australia and the US have re-energised the *Quad* to take their cooperation forward.

In spite of being latecomers into the region, the European Union has its own special characteristics, which make it an ideal partner for these island States. The EU's image as a

¹ "PM Modi Concludes 2-Nation Visit to Maldives, Sri Lanka". 2019. *The Times Of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-sets-tone-for-neighborhood-first-in-crucial-lanka-maldives-visits/articleshow/69713658.cms>.

² Germany Foreign Office. 2020. "The German Government Adopts Policy Guidelines On The Indo-Pacific Region". <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/german-government-policy-guidelines-indo-pacific/2380510>.

benevolent actor is in contrast to other powers, which are seen as uncaring players whose primary aim is to get an upper hand in geopolitical competition. The inhabitants of these island States, who have for long been treated as mere appendages to the lands that they happen to inhabit, are likely to welcome an approach that takes their lives into consideration, rather than merely their homes. India, which has close cultural and political ties with these States, will benefit by partnering with the EU to enhance its own soft power in these States. Likewise, the EU, which does not share the so-called ‘values’ of communist China, as was most recently noted by European Council president Charles Michel in the UN,³ can comfortably collaborate with a likeminded State such as India to promote its own liberal democratic values in the region.

Challenges and Benefits

Even a cursory look at the map suffices to show that the island States of the Indian Ocean are located amidst busy international shipping lanes (ISLs). While Maldives and Sri Lanka are almost midway between the straits of Malacca and Hormuz, the islands of Mauritius and Reunion lie close abreast the route between the Cape of Good Hope and the Indonesian straits. Seychelles, Comoros, and Mayotte, lie between the Persian Gulf and the Cape of Good Hope. The strategic location of these States means that they can keep a close watch, and interdict if necessary, merchandise trade flowing along these ISLs.

Moreover, as the world population nears eight billion, the world is looking for ways to move away from its current dependence on land resources alone. This has led to the advocacy of tapping the resources of the oceans, around the globe. The Indian Ocean, as the third-largest water body on the planet, is one of the few remaining undemarcated regions that could be exploited. The role of the island States of the IOR accordingly increases in value. Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that we see jostling between major powers in the IOR.

Along with the economic rise of China in the last decade, we are now also witnessing a geopolitical desire in Beijing to access new resources while protecting its interests abroad, including in the IOR. China has quite explicitly stated in its 2019 Defence White Paper that it seeks to protect its “*overseas interests*”, which include “*security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions*”.⁴

To achieve its goals, China will require access points for its rapidly expanding navy in waters distant from its shores. At the very least, the PLA Navy will require refuelling and repair facilities. In the IOR, China is investing in port construction in a number of countries including Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, Kenya and Bangladesh. India, which has cold relations with China, sees these projects as a challenge and views the expanding PLA Navy as a threat. This has

³ European Council. 2020. "Speech By President Charles Michel At The UN General Assembly". <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/25/a-stronger-and-more-autonomous-european-union-powering-a-fairer-world-speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-un-general-assembly/>.

⁴ The State Council of the People's Republic of China. 2019. "China'S National Defense In The New Era". http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html.

led to a geopolitical competition between India and China to gain or deny influence in the strategically located island States of the IOR as elsewhere.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by Beijing in 2013, China is financing infrastructure projects in recipient countries. Through this, China has been able to entice the leadership of infrastructure-deficient island States of the IOR. India, which is comparatively poorer, finds it difficult to match the Chinese economic muscle. Currently, it is partnering Japan to provide an alternative⁵ and prevent further Chinese inroads in the Indian Ocean economies.

However, India has been occasionally accused of strong-arming or worse, direct intervention in these IOR island States. Sri Lanka's former President, Mahina Rajapaksa, famously accused India of intervening in the country's 2015 national elections.⁶ Similar accusations of meddling were made by the opposition after elections in Maldives⁷ in 2018. India has, of course, quite correctly denied these accusations, even though it is widely acknowledged that New Delhi was, indeed, unhappy with the political leadership in both, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, due to their pro-China policies. Occasional anti-India sentiments continue to crop up in the island States of the IOR. Seychelles, for instance, cancelled an agreement with India to build joint naval facilities on Assumption Island in 2018,⁸ while the opposition in Maldives is currently carrying out an "India-out" campaign.⁹

The *India bogey* is mostly a convenient tool for gaining leverage in domestic politics in the IOR island States. Nevertheless, the EU, with its unique characteristics, can lend India a helping hand in this situation. The EU shares liberal democratic values with India, but without the baggage of being thought of as a regional hegemon or a bully. Its partnership with India in the island States of the IOR will provide Indian efforts with greater legitimacy and respect. At the same time, the EU could further its own political engagement by piggyback riding upon India's already sizeable political and cultural connections in these States.

The EU's current maritime engagement in the IOR is largely focussed on its activities to counter piracy off the east coast of Africa, where it has successfully run programmes such as MaSé (maritime security in the Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean) and CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean). CRIMARIO has now been wound-up and has

⁵ "Sri Lanka Signs Port Deal with India, Japan". 2020. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sri-lanka-signs-port-deal-with-india-japan/articleshow/69547981.cms>.

⁶ "India's Spy Agency RAW Behind My Poll Defeat, Says Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa". 2015. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/sri-lanka-president-mahinda-rajapaksa-blames-india-raw-for-his-election-defeat-244216-2015-03-13>.

⁷ "Maldives Oppn Party Accuses India Of Interfering in Elections, Calls for Criminal Investigation". 2019. *Indus Dictum*. <https://indusdictum.com/2019/12/24/maldives-oppn-accuses-india-of-interfering-in-elections-calls-for-criminal-investigation/>.

⁸ Thande, George. 2018. "Seychelles Parliament Blocks Planned Indian Naval Base On Remote Island". <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-seychelles-india/seychelles-parliament-blocks-planned-indian-naval-base-on-remote-island-idUSKBN1JI0UL>.

⁹ Moorthy, N Sathiya. 2020. "Maldives: Nasheed, Yameen Competing To Hurt Solih, India?". *ORF*. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/maldives-nasheed-yameen-competing-to-hurt-solih-india/>.

given way to CRIMARIO-II, which was launched on 29 April 2020 and concentrates EU efforts at Maritime Domain Awareness in the waters off South Asia and Southeast Asia.¹⁰

This move to strengthen the EU's earlier feeble presence in the larger IOR is in keeping with the stated aim of the European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, to provide the EU a "geopolitical commission", rather than merely a "political commission".¹¹ Surprisingly, no specific mention has been made of the IOR island States despite their manifestly favourable locations as has been described earlier. If Brussels were to pursue a more focussed policy vis-à-vis the island States of the IOR, especially if this were to be done in conjunction with New Delhi, both the EU and India could further their objectives in tandem with each other.

Moving Forward - Policy Recommendations

1. The EU and India must support the tourism industry in island States of the IOR.

India and the EU must come together to support the island States economically. This does not necessarily mean financing infrastructure development like China or other powers. If the island States could generate revenue on their own, they would not need to borrow debt.

In this context, one should remember that Chinese leverage in these States has increased in direct proportion to the number of tourists China sends.

India and the EU should help the IOR island States to market themselves as tourist destinations in their respective regions. Moreover, as these States open their economies (including the tourism sector)¹², India and the EU must encourage private investors to take advantage of the same.

2. The EU and India must collaborate closely for disaster relief and humanitarian missions in the IOR.

After the 2004 tsunami, the EU's response was deemed inadequate. The EU admitted that it lacked transportation means and also that its initial focus was on repatriating EU citizens¹³. An anaemic naval presence in the IOR hamstrung the humanitarian goals of the EU despite funds and eagerness to help.

The Indian Navy has successfully led India's own robust response to disaster relief in the IOR, most recently after the Mozambique floods. The EU could partner with the largest Navy next door to reach disaster affected states in the IOR in the shortest possible time.

3. The EU must work with the island states to mitigate climate change effects.

¹⁰ "EU CRIMARIO | Rationale & Objectives". 2020. *EU CRIMARIO*. <https://www.crimario.eu/en/the-project/rationale-objectives/>.

¹¹ "The Von Der Leyen Commission's Priorities For 2019-2024". 2020. *Europarl.Europa.Eu*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646148/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)646148_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/646148/EPRS_BRI(2020)646148_EN.pdf).

¹² "Islands To Be Leased For Tourism Development Through Open Bidding". 2020. Maldives Ministry of Tourism https://www.tourism.gov.mv/en/announcements/islands_to_be_leased_for_tourism_development_through_open_bidding.

¹³ "The December 2004 Tsunami". 2005. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/civil_protection/tsunami.htm.

4. The EU is the most vocal advocate of preventing climate change. At the same time, the island states of the IOR would be the most affected if these efforts fail. The EU together with India must help the states of the IOR to prevent and brace for, if needed, the effects of climate change and consequent sea rise.

5. The EU and India must help the island States of the IOR curb IUU fishing.

The illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing negatively affects marine-habitats, fish stocks and economies, especially of developing states. The small island States of IOR may not possess sufficient means to patrol their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and need help to prevent IUU fishing. The EU and especially India can provide aid in this task.

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- 3 European Council. 2020. "Speech By President Charles Michel At The UN General Assembly". <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/25/a-stronger-and-more-autonomous-european-union-powering-a-fairer-world-speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-un-general-assembly/>.
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¹³"The December 2004 Tsunami". 2005. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/civil_protection/tsunami.htm.

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