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India-France Relations: Look to the Indian Ocean

“At a grand strategic level, France and India’s interests in the Indian Ocean are closely aligned.”

By Iskander Rehman
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Since his investiture last year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has startled many observers with the hyperactive nature of his foreign policy. Inevitably, journalistic commentary tends to focus primarily on the Modi administration’s diplomatic engagement with established great powers, such as the United States, or with emerging behemoths such as China. In contrast, when India’s relations with European nations are discussed, it is almost invariably through the softer, blurrier, lens of economic and trade-related issues.

There is, however, a “hard” aspect to India’s ties with certain industrialized middle powers in Europe – and all too often the strategic dimension of these relationships is overlooked. This is particularly true with regard to the French Republic. There has always been a rather unique quality to the Franco-Indian relationship. Even at the height of the Cold War, when India’s rapport with NATO was frequently colored by mistrust, relations between Paris and New Delhi remained relatively cordial. Although French security elites were discomforted by India’s rapprochement with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, their own cherished concept of strategic autonomy provided them with a degree of empathy for India’s quest for maneuverability within a polarized international system. France was one of the first Western countries to lift the arms embargo that hit both India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the 1965 conflict. Similarly, during the 1971 war, Paris was one of the only Western capitals to comment on the legitimacy of India’s

concerns vis-à-vis the refugee crisis in its border regions with Bangladesh. Perhaps most importantly, France refused to sermonize India after the 1998 nuclear tests, and publicly opposed U.S. sanctions.

Since 1998, the Franco-Indian relationship has become increasingly strategic, even as one could argue that it has yet to realize its full economic potential. The Indo-French strategic dialogue is now broad and wide-ranging, and the annual joint military exercises have each year grown more elaborate. When Modi and French President Francois Hollande met earlier this spring, they succeeded in injecting new energy into Franco-Indian security ties. Building on this renewed momentum, both leaders should recognize that it is in the Indian Ocean region that both countries' strategic interactions have the potential to prove the most transformational.

It is easy, sometimes, for foreign observers to forget that France is an Indian Ocean power, with a medium-sized military presence but a vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as well as a longstanding sphere of influence in the southwestern quadrant of the Indian Ocean. La Reunion and Mayotte account for about one million French citizens, and when combined, France's EEZ in the Indian Ocean amounts to more than 2.6 million square km.

In terms of cultural influence, there is a certain overlap with regard to French and Indian soft power in the Southwestern Indian Ocean. For example, Madagascar, with its strategic location astride the Mozambique Channel, is a former French colony, where French is still widely spoken, but where for a long time ethnic Indians of Gujarati origin controlled a large chunk of the local economy. Similarly, 25 percent of the population of la Reunion is of Indian origin.

At a grand strategic level, France and India's interests in the Indian Ocean are closely aligned. Both countries have historically played an active custodial and humanitarian role throughout the region. They share concerns over the risks of sea-borne nuclear proliferation, and with regard to malevolent non-state actors. The two republics uphold similar core values when it comes to freedom of navigation, and closely monitor the threats posed by certain revisionist actors to the security of sea lines of communication.

Preserving Stability

France's interest in helping preserve stability in the Indian Ocean is aptly summarized in the 2013 French White Paper, which describes the Indian Ocean as a transit region for international trade, and "at the heart of world strategic challenges." France maintains a military presence in the Persian Gulf region, with air, naval, and ground forces in Abu Dhabi, as well as in the Horn of Africa, in Djibouti. In addition to the basing of these military assets, Paris recognizes that the Indian Ocean Region's strategic equilibrium can only be truly maintained once India has emerged as a more powerful naval actor, with a greater capacity for sustained operations at sea and power projection. The annual *Varuna* naval exercises between India and France should therefore not solely be viewed through the prism of military diplomacy, but also as a deliberate French effort in regional capacity building.

Over the past few years, these exercises have grown in scale and complexity, involving high-end platforms such as nuclear powered submarines and aircraft carriers. Through the regular conduct

of such joint exercises, both countries have increased their interoperability and general proficiency. French sales of *Scorpene* class submarines, and naval surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems will strengthen India's naval capacity, and if fitted with conformal fuel tanks and Exocet anti-ship cruise missiles, the Rafale could potentially play an important maritime strike role. In the years ahead, there are opportunities for France and India to enhance their cooperation in space-based maritime surveillance, unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) technology, amphibious special forces training, and in precision targeting in clustered littoral environments.

In the future, the Persian Gulf is likely to become a region of increased military competition – whether conventional, nuclear or sub-conventional. Despite reported progress in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, there are growing doubts, both in Paris and New Delhi, over the ability of the Obama administration to stem the flow of sectarian violence currently wracking the region, or to durably prevent further nuclear proliferation. In light of these shared uncertainties over Washington's staying power in the Middle East, it might prove judicious for second-tier democratic powers to begin to more effectively coordinate their strategies and policies. A more institutionalized strategic dialogue between India and France with regard to Persian Gulf security might provide a good first step.

Finally, Paris and New Delhi should seek to enhance their cooperation in the field of maritime domain awareness and intelligence gathering. Over the past few years, a dual-use infrastructure competition has been emerging across the Indo-Pacific. This low-level, almost subterranean, contest is unfolding in Southeast Asian archipelagic regions, where both the U.S. and China have competed to provide countries such as Indonesia with coastal radar systems under dual management, or throughout the Indian Ocean basin, where both India and China have vied for access and surveillance amongst smaller littoral and island nations.

Under the guise of regional capacity building, revisionist powers such as China can slowly expand their influence and develop the intelligence and support infrastructure needed to sustain military operations at sea. By spreading coastal radar chains, or shore-based electronic sensors in places such as the Seychelles, or by discreetly laying undersea acoustic arrays along portions of the Indian Ocean seabed, China can increase its operational awareness of the maritime environs of both Indian and French partners. Similarly, squadrons of unarmed Chinese drones pre-positioned in certain littoral states – ostensibly for assistance in anti-piracy and anti-smuggling efforts – could provide Chinese forces with low-end intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) in certain contested maritime regions, and deliver additional discrimination and targeting information to Chinese military assets.

There is clearly scope for both France and India's diplomatic and intelligence communities to better coordinate on the challenge posed by dual-use infrastructure, particularly in Eastern Africa and the Southwestern Indian Ocean. Winning this competition will require the kind of holistic approach the Modi government has shown most recently in the Indian Ocean, using different kinds of tools – economic and developmental – to win over smaller littoral and archipelagic states, which, one must not forget, have their own agency and have proven adept throughout history at playing off one great power against another.