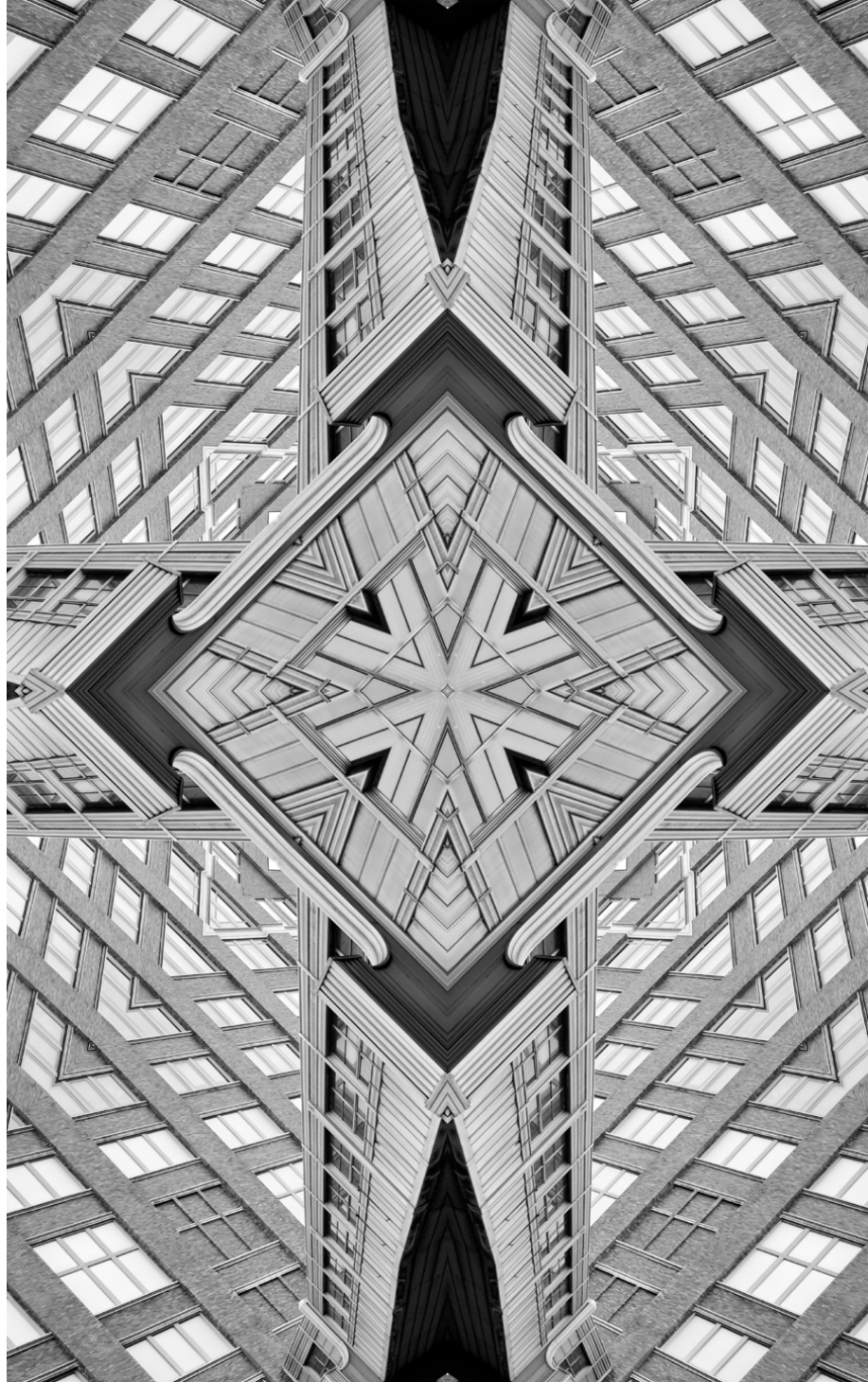


Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 576
SEPTEMBER 2022



India's Maritime Agenda Pivots to Western Indian Ocean

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Abstract

The Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR) is linked to India in several ways, yet it remains conspicuous in its absence from India's foreign policy discourse. This lack of attention is now beginning to reverse as external players stake their geopolitical claims in the region. India has responded by reorienting its own nautical outlook towards WIOR and building friendly relationships with African countries that straddle the region. This brief examines India's defence and security engagement in the WIOR, particularly in the naval and maritime domain.

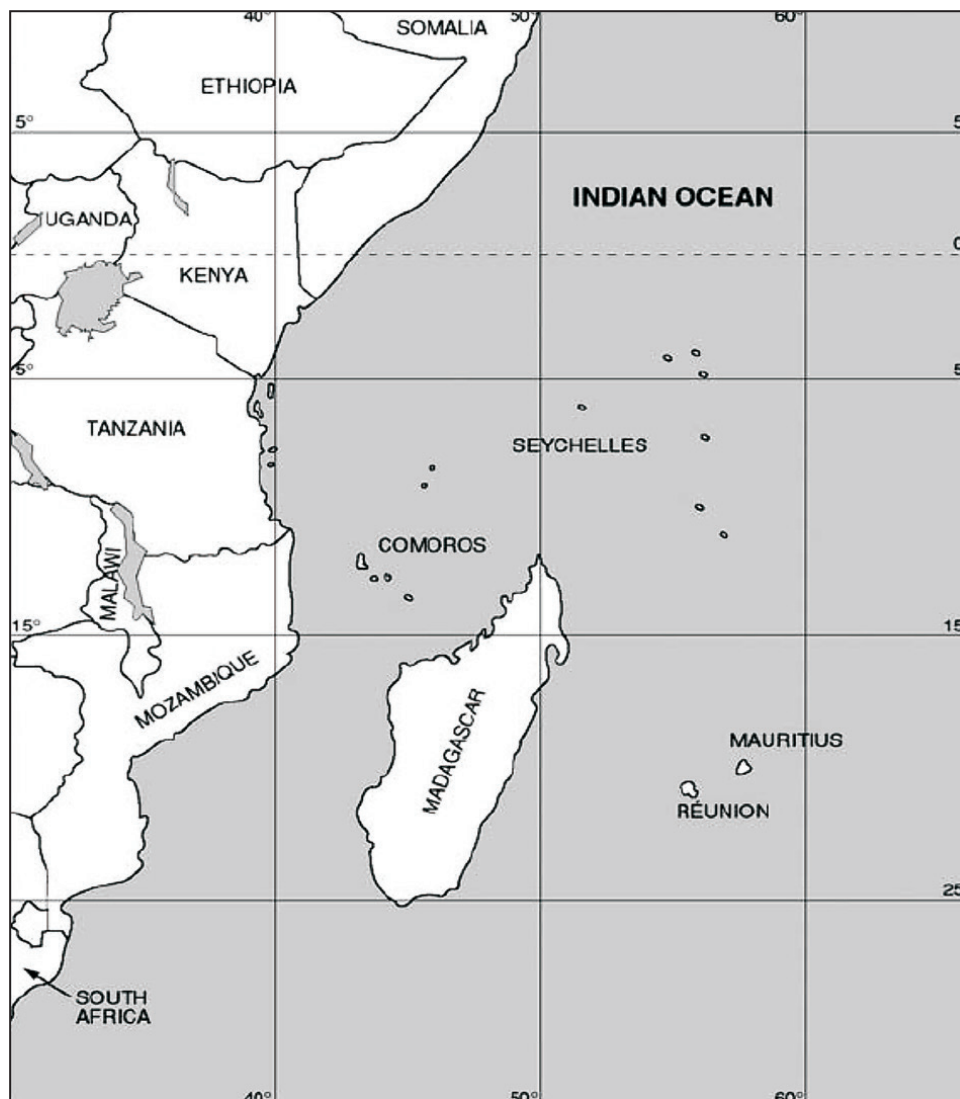
India's defence and security cooperation with countries of the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR)^a has evolved in recent years, especially in the maritime domain. This can be attributed to two main factors. First, India is rising as a maritime power sitting astride critical sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian Navy (IN) is increasingly positioning itself as a security provider for the regional commons, assuming the role of a security stabiliser in the IOR and as a source of positive deterrence^b and provider of regional public goods.^{c,1}

Second, countries in Africa are becoming more aware of the importance of securing their maritime domain and promoting the sustainable use of marine resources in order to foster wealth creation and development. Much of this emphasis has been directed towards the WIOR^d—where states have overlapping geopolitical and naval interests. The region is home to some of the busiest International Shipping Lines (ISL) in the world that carry the bulk of international cargo and container traffic. The WIOR is also naturally endowed: a 2017 World Wide Fund (WWF) report pegged the WIOR's total natural assets at US\$ 333.8 billion by conservative estimates.² Of these, fisheries are the largest asset, followed by mangroves, sea-grass, and coral reefs.

India has therefore rightly identified the West Indian Ocean as a region of primary interest in its *2015 Maritime Security Strategy*.³ The attention is in light of both its outreach towards Africa, and the increased role of Indian Navy as a regional security partner and provider of regional public goods.

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- a According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), the WIOR consists of 10 countries: Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Comoros, Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, and the French overseas territory of Réunion.
- b The Indian Navy being a source of 'positive deterrence' means that not only is it attempting to improve the maritime capabilities of its partners and expanding its own crisis response capacity, it is doing so in ways that do not inadvertently antagonise any regional or extra-regional powers.
- c The term 'regional public goods' includes providing sea-lane security and humanitarian responses such as relief materials, protective equipment, and food and medical supplies.
- d The Western Indian Ocean is a coherent biogeographic, climatic, and socio-political region that is home to countries that belong to different sub-regions of Africa like Somalia in the Horn of Africa; Kenya and Tanzania in Eastern Africa; Mozambique and South Africa in the southern regions; and the Indian Ocean island nations.

Map 1 The Western Indian Ocean Region



Source: Jeremy Kiszka, et.al., 2009⁴

The Western Indian Ocean Region: An Overview

The Western Indian Ocean sits in a geo-strategic location. To its north is the Horn of Africa (HOA) region that is beset by piracy and extremism, among other challenges. The HOA is located at an important geographical location of the trijunction connecting the ISL or maritime highways of the world viz. those leading east to Arabian Sea and the Eastern Indian Ocean, those leading north to the North Arabian Sea and Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf, and those leading south to the WIOR and the African coast.

For long, maritime security in WIOR was associated with piracy off the coast of Somalia. With concerted multinational and regional efforts including the provision of escorts to vulnerable commercial vessels, incidents of large-scale piracy in the WIOR have reduced since 2012.⁵ The attention has since shifted to newer, non-traditional and transnational maritime crimes. These include maritime crimes^e and unregulated marine activities; the spillover of the conflicts in Mozambique, Yemen, and Somalia into the maritime domain; the growing use of grey-zone tactics;^f and the proliferation of external naval deployments, which could undermine regional stability.

In recent years, the Western Indian Ocean has witnessed growing militarisation with the presence of external players like the United States (US), China, France, and India. External powers have been naturally attracted towards the WIOR owing to the region's abundant natural resources and its role as a conduit for oil and gas trade. Subsequently, both external players and regional African governments and stakeholders are attempting to navigate the security dynamics in the region. The US continues to have stakes in the region through its military base at Diego Garcia, and conducts capacity-building exercises in the region like Cutlass Express. France has traditionally played a significant role in the region. Through its overseas department of Réunion and Mayotte, it continues to establish itself as an Indian Ocean Rim state and engages closely with regional multilateral institutions like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).

e Maritime crimes include maritime piracy, smuggling of exotic flora and fauna, illegal carrying of weapons, drug trafficking, unauthorised fishing, human trafficking, and discharging of waste in ocean waters.

f Grey-zone tactics involve intentionally pursuing political objectives through carefully designed operations that are below certain thresholds so as to avoid a full-scale war. These include night-time hit-and-run attacks, mining of shipping lanes, and maritime drone attacks. Grey-zone tactics may also sometimes involve attacks by state-sponsored insurgents.

The Western Indian Ocean Region: An Overview

From an African context, the imperatives of infrastructure demand and their own capacity deficiencies in ensuring the safety of their maritime domain have necessitated foreign external assistance and presence in the WIOR. So far, the presence of China, India, US or France, has not been a source of concern for African countries in the region, although they remain mindful of not getting entangled in geopolitical rivalries that could force them into making zero-sum choices. For India though, the incremental presence of China's People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) in the region has been a source of concern.⁶

The East African (EA) coast is part of China's Maritime Silk Route (MSR). Countries in the EA coast benefit from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments. China is devoting massive sums of money and is funding and constructing infrastructures across the region, such as ports, railways, and roads.⁷ This has been complemented by a steady increase in PLAN warships, research survey vessels, and fishing fleets in the IOR. India is aware that the PLAN's ability to maintain presence in the Indian Ocean may constrain India's freedom of navigation.

The growing 'militarisation dilemma' is a source of insecurity in the region.⁸ If the presence of external actors in the region are to be reduced, it would weaken efforts to secure shipping lanes and patrol Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). On the other hand, if there is an increase in external military operations in the WIOR, it may undermine regional stability, ferment tensions, and undermine collective efforts to provide security at sea.

Governance gaps and ineffective security apparatus along the eastern African flank, as well as the rise in illegal fishing in the area, could encourage a resurgence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden. This would threaten India's trade and energy shipping routes, most of which pass through this region.

As WIOR countries still face basic security-related challenges that threaten their sovereignty and they do not always have adequate resources that address these threats, any Indian assistance to African countries in this regard would prove beneficial. Combined with diplomacy and development, defence can be the third 'D' with which India could progress its international and regional cooperation with WIOR nations. This comes at a time when African countries have raised their military spending despite the economic hardships brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, compared to other regions of the world, military spending in Africa continues to remain modest.

Elements of India-WIOR Defence and Security Engagement

In the last two decades, parallel to India's economic growth and rise as a military player, the scope and magnitude of its defence engagements with WIOR countries has increased exponentially. Today, India's interactions with the region cover a wider range—from joint exercises, memberships in common multilateral forums, hydrography surveys, counter-piracy initiatives, trainings, deputation of officers, capacity-building, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

A specific engagement involves India exporting indigenous armoured vehicles to African countries such as Uganda to fulfil their requirements for local police work.⁸ India plans to supply African countries with indigenous defence equipment manufactured in pursuit of the 'Make in India' initiative.⁹ India held a mini defence-expo in Tanzania in May 2022, during which 16 Indian companies from government and private sector interacted with Tanzania People's Defence Force (TDPF) with the aim of increasing Indian defence footprint in Tanzania.¹⁰ These developments are in addition to India's long history of participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions in different countries in Africa.¹¹

Table 1
Defence Budgets and Ranks in Military Strength

Country	Defence Budget (in US\$ B)	Ranking in the Continent in Military Strength
Egypt	4.357	1
South Africa	2.910	2
Algeria	9.700	3
Nigeria	5.875	4
Morocco	5.438	5
Ethiopia	0.538	6
Angola	1.059	7
Libya	3.475	8
Kenya	1.186	9
Tunisia	1.177	10

Source: *The Global Firepower Index*¹²

^g India has donated both utility vehicles for civilian use and armoured vehicles to the Ugandan People's Defence Force for military purposes which includes buses, troop carriers, ambulances and motorcycles. See: <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-extends-helping-hand-to-africa-sends-vehicles-for-military-and-civil-use-to-uganda/2067185/>

Elements of India-WIOR Defence and Security Engagement

As noted briefly earlier, military exercises comprise a significant part of collaborations between India and the countries of WIOR. In March 2019, for example, the inaugural Africa India Field Training Exercise (AFINDEX-19) was conducted in Pune, drawing participants from 17 African countries.^{h,13} African countries have also been enhancing their participation in defence exhibitions being organised by India. Indeed, India and Africa are demonstrating that there are a number of ways by which cooperation in the defence sphere can be upscaled. African countries are looking forward to gaining the advantages of experience and equipment that India's defence establishment can offer.¹⁴

Another initiative is the first-ever India-Africa Defence Ministers Conclave (IADMC) that took place in Lucknow in 2020, during which the 'Lucknow Declaration' was signed by 50 African countries.¹⁵ The Declaration focused on the UN's counterterrorism efforts and compliance with the UN regime on terrorism. It also aims to improve information-sharing towards securing sea-lanes, tightening measures against crime and theft in the maritime sphere, improving disaster preparedness response, and tackling piracy and illegal and unregulated fishing.

The IADMC is expected to deliberate on issues of mutual security interests and this could be an important addition to the security cooperation basket between India and Africa. In September 2021, India proposed to institutionalise the India-Africa Defence Dialogue during a series of DefExpos to be held once every two years.¹⁶ This would help augment the existing partnership and explore new areas of convergence for mutual engagements including in areas like capacity-building, training, cyber security, maritime security, and counterterrorism. The 2022 edition of the Defence Dialogue is scheduled to take place in Gujarat in October under the theme, "India-Africa, Adopting Strategy for Synergizing and Strengthening Defence and Security Cooperation".

^h This group of 17 African countries includes both WIOR countries and non-WIOR countries from other subregions of the African continent.

Table 2
Indian Training Teams in Africa

Details	Country	Role	Year Established
Training Team	Seychelles	Military Training and IT	1989
Indian Army Training Team (IATT)	Lesotho	Military Training	2001 (Terminated in 2017)
Indian Military Training Team (IMTT)	Uganda	Staff College Instructors	2010
IATT	Namibia	Engineers Advisors and IT	2013
Indian Air Force Training Team (IAFTT)	Mauritius	Training Assistance to Police	1974
IAFTT	Namibia	Pilot Training	1996
Tri Services Training Team	Tanzania	Revamping of Command and Staff College	2017

Notes:

- 1) *Naval Advisors, Operational and Support Teams are based in Mauritius and Seychelles; however, they are not called 'Training Teams' even though they conduct regular trainings*
- 2) *Observers, Liaison Teams associated with Peace Support Operations are not included in this list*
- 3) *Past Indian Training Teams such as those of Indian Army and Air Force in Angola, Indian Air Force in Congo and Tri-Services Team in Tanzania are not part of the list*

Specific to the WIOR, ship visits from India have been increasing in frequency especially after 2008 when the menace of piracy off Somalia was endangering international trade and commerce. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 has also provided an opportunity for India to increase its engagement in the region. Since May 2020, under the Indian Navy's 'Mission SAGAR', India has delivered Covid-19-related assistance to WIOR countries, including food aid, oxygen concentrators, medicines, and deployment of medical assistance teams. As part of this mission, *INS Kesari* successfully visited Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles in May and June 2020.¹⁷ This was followed by Mission SAGAR-II in December 2020, during which *INS Airavat* delivered food aid to Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea.

Such efforts have been possible due to the Indian Navy's philosophy of 'Mission Based Deployments'¹⁸ that was first articulated in 2017, under

Elements of India-WIOR Defence and Security Engagement

which combat-ready ships of the Indian Navy are deployed in the waters of the Western Indian Ocean in order to respond to any requirement be it policing, maintaining order, search and rescue (SAR), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), or as part of protocol in international cooperation. For example, the Indian Navy was one of the first responders when Cyclone Idai made landfall in the port of Beira, Mozambique in 2019; it was repeated in 2020 during Cyclone Diane’ in Madagascar, and following the MV Wakashio oil spill off Mauritius, also in 2020. India has also extended support for capacity-building efforts to the Mozambique Armed Forces by gifting two Fast Interceptor Craft (FIC) intended for patrol and rescue operations and self-defence equipment in December 2021.¹⁹

Other activities will also seek to boost India’s presence in the WIOR. In 2020, India became an observer to the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), which is the sole regional organisation in Africa composed exclusively of island nations. It has also obtained observer status in the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) of 2009 and the DCoC’s Jeddah Amendment of 2017.²⁰ As an observer, India will work with DCoC’s member states towards coordinating and contributing to enhanced maritime security in the IOR. Another example of this partnership is India’s invitation to 14 African countries in WIOR and other parts of the continent, to the multilateral naval exercise, MILAN 22, at Vishakhapatnam in February and March 2022.

Table 3
India’s Maritime Assistance to Select WIOR Countries

Country	Assistance / Export
Mauritius	<p>Regularly patrolled Mauritius EEZ since 2003</p> <p>Deputises naval officer to manage the National Coast Guard of Mauritius</p> <p>Gifted Indian Naval Ship (INS) Amar in 1971</p> <p>Periodic provider of maritime reconnaissance assets – Interceptor patrol boat (2001), 3 Dornier maritime surveillance aircraft (2004 and 2010), 3 Island aircraft engines (2013), an inshore survey vessel (2013), chain of coastal surveillance radar (2017)</p> <p>Conducts hydrographic surveys and assists Mauritian Coast Guard ships in EEZ surveillance and joint patrols</p> <p>Announced a US\$500-million line of credit in 2017</p> <p>In 2018, both countries signed a pact to enhance maritime security cooperation in anti-piracy operations, and in countering illegal fishing and drug trafficking in IOR</p>

Elements of India-WIOR Defence and Security Engagement

Country	Assistance / Export
Seychelles	<p>Indian Navy and Coast Guard regularly extend assistance to Seychelles in maintaining security by providing maritime surveillance, ocean surveys, training, and maritime equipment and repair</p> <p>Since 2005, India has gifted the Seychelles Coast Guard a fast-attack vessel INS Tarmugli, 3 Dornier Do-228 aircrafts, 3 Chetak helicopters and interceptor boats, the latest in 2019</p> <p>India also installed 6 coastal surveillance radar systems in 2015 and assisted in aerial and sea patrols in Seychelles' EEZ</p> <p>Conducts regular army-army exercise (LAMITYE) biennially; the 8th edition took place in 2018</p>
Madagascar	<p>During President Ram Nath Kovind's visit in 2018, both countries emphasised on cooperation on maritime security and signed an MoU on defence cooperation with a focus on capacity building and training of Madagascar's personnel</p> <p>India activated a listening post in Northern Madagascar in 2007</p> <p>Regular goodwill port visits to Antsiranana</p> <p>Ministry of Shipping, Government of India hosted the first ever Maritime India Summit in April 2016</p> <p>Indian Navy provides regular humanitarian assistance (2016), Operation Vanilla in aftermath of Cyclone Diane in March 2020</p>
Comoros	<p>During Vice President Venkaiah Naidu's visit in 2019, India extended a US\$20-million LOC to Comoros for strengthening bilateral defence and maritime cooperation</p> <p>Regular goodwill port visits to Moroni (2018)</p> <p>India sent a 14-member medical assistance team in May 2020</p>
Mozambique	<p>Indian Navy regularly patrols Mozambique Channel and provided security during AU Summit in 2003 in Maputo and World Economic Forum Summit in 2004</p> <p>Regular goodwill ship visits (2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016)</p> <p>2006 signed MoU on Defence cooperation under which a Joint Defence Working Group was set up</p> <p>During defence minister Rajnath Singh's visit in July 2019, India gifted 44 SUVs, signed MoU's on hydrography and sharing of white shipping information, and gifted 2 Indian-made Fast Interceptor Boats</p> <p>A four-member team of Indian Coast Guard is assisting with training and support for maintenance and operation of the two boats</p>

Source: Premesha Saha and Abhishek Mishra, 2020²¹

Elements of India-WIOR Defence and Security Engagement

Another avenue of cooperation between India and WIOR countries is maritime information-sharing. Effective maritime enforcement capacity is dependent upon a nation's strong Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).ⁱ This capacity is vital for promoting marine safety, stopping illegal activity, responding to vessels in distress, tracking at-sea transshipments, and protecting territorial waters from illegal incursions by foreign vessels. Most of the countries in WIOR lack the requisite capacity to effectively patrol their waters, and India has been helping them in setting up coastal surveillance networks.²²

In this context, India launched an *Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region* (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram in December 2018. The centre collects, analyses, and disseminates information related to maritime safety and HADR requirements at sea. In pursuit of this goal, the Indian Navy has been engaging with friendly foreign navies for concluding and signing of agreements for exchange of *White Shipping Information* in order to enhance India's MDA in the IOR. Till date, India has signed White Shipping Information with African countries like Mauritius, Seychelles, Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria. India and Tanzania have also exchanged a draft agreement on the sharing of white shipping information and the upgrade of surveillance systems. The motive behind such engagement is to improve linkages that are central to improving security cooperation in the maritime domain. Towards this end, India has requested and invited African countries in the WIOR to post international liaison officers at the *IFC-IOR* in New Delhi. Mauritius and Seychelles have already expressed interest to deputise their naval liaison officers.

The Indian Navy's participation in the 2021 edition of the US AFRICOM directed multilateral maritime exercise *Cutlass Express* was a visible demonstration of India's growing role in the region.²³ The Indian Navy trained the contingents from participating African navies in various fields across the spectrum of maritime security operations. Participating in these exercises helps improve interoperability and increase support in MDA, maritime interdiction, adherence to rule of law, and counter-proliferation capabilities in order to disrupt illicit maritime activities and blue crimes.

i Maritime Domain Awareness has been defined by the International Maritime Organization. Definition premised on "effective understanding" of anything associated with the maritime domain which may impact the security, safety, economy, or the environment. MDA is a nations' ability to gather, process, analyse, and share real time information about what is occurring at sea.

India's increased engagements in WIOR is occurring at a time when the country is shaping its vision for the entire Indian Ocean Region. The vision called SAGAR or Security and Growth for All in the Region, states: "Our vision for Indian Ocean Region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region; and, to use our capabilities for the benefit of all in our common maritime home. We seek a future for Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region."²⁴

The vision of SAGAR (literally meaning 'oceans' in the Hindi language) has assumed significance in current times as it is becoming increasingly apparent that maritime security and sustainable use of marine and oceanic resources, is vital for securing states' security and economic aspirations. The vision has distinct but interrelated elements, and its enshrined principles provide India with a coherent framework for its engagements in the region.

A number of challenges are involved, ranging from connectivity and security to culture and identity. The unimpeded movement of trade and commerce is of vital importance to India. At the same time, the country needs to harness the sea for resources and clean energy. Although India's vision of SAGAR is not a break away from the past, it is being presented as an organic, coherent vision for the first time. Its articulation has effectively demonstrated the linkage between maritime cooperation, maritime security, and economic development. In this sense, Security and Growth is viewed by India as a co-terminus, rather than a zero-sum game.²⁵

“The unimpeded movement of trade and commerce is vital to India. At the same time, it needs to harness the sea for resources and clean energy.”

Recommendations and Conclusion

India's defence and security cooperation with WIOR countries, especially in the maritime domain, has grown manifold in recent years. While these ties are neither well-entrenched nor definitive, they are certainly progressing. India's advantage in the WIOR stems primarily from its geographical proximity and centrality in Indian Ocean affairs. India also shares cultural commonalities with countries in the region, and the diaspora has only increased in size in recent years.²⁶ It would not be an overstatement to say that India has considerable influence in each of these nations, owing to the goodwill that it enjoys, made stronger by bilateral engagements.

Given the current trajectory of growth in Indian technology and manufacturing capacity, the likely nature of future engagements with nations in the WIOR may include enhanced bilateral Naval cooperation, supply of more hardware such as maritime patrol aircraft (MPA)/ offshore patrol vessels (OPV) or fast interceptor craft (FIC), assistance in establishing Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems (CSRS), and development of hydrographic capabilities. Moreover, the setting up of Intra-Regional Security/Police training centres in WIOR will enhance India's reach and goodwill among the littoral and island nations of the region. More training courses for military as well as civilian personnel, and the strengthening of relationship by fulfilling other requirements of WIOR countries, could help India achieve its strategic objectives in the region and the Indian Navy will continue to be in a position to provide security in the IOR.


This brief offers the following recommendations for strengthening India-WIOR defence cooperation.

- 1) Improving inter-agency coordination and setting up institutionalised mechanisms. In India's internal system, the lack of coordination at the apex level and their immediate echelons below, viz. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Ministry of Defence (MoD), and the Headquarters of the three services, the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) Headquarters and Coast Guard Headquarters, affects the manner in which it conducts its defence diplomacy. A 'whole of government' approach would result in better decision-making at the MEA and MoD levels. It would also convey a simple message to the host countries in WIOR that have smaller and more integrated structures that are often encumbered by the vast array India's Armed Force outreach activities. Therefore, the imperative is for institutionalised mechanisms at the macro level for forming Joint Working Groups (JWG) or similar bodies to enhance cooperation with WIOR countries on white shipping, coastal security, disaster management, IUU fishing, and hydrography.

Recommendations and Conclusion

- 2) Enhanced interactions, more staff talks, two-way delegation visits, including Army and Air Force visits. Visit of all four Service Headquarters, Ministry officials, and Training institutions should be coordinated and have a tri-service character.
- 3) Trainings. Continue and enhance the existing courses being offered at the officer and Other Rank (OR) level. National Defence College (NDC) and Staff College. Reciprocity in this regard may be considered. Any further thrust areas, for example Artillery, Intelligence, and Nuclear Biological Chemical Defence (NBCD), should be explored. India should deliver more training courses in the WIOR, particularly short-term ones.
- 4) Peacekeeping Support Operations. Both India and WIOR (in particular, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) have long years of experience in peacekeeping. Greater thrust in this area should be considered, including supporting the Kenyan International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC), conducting exchanges of faculty between the Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK) and IPSTC. Moreover, India and the WIOR countries can explore activities such as exchanging more literature on peacekeeping operations, institutional exchanges, and organising seminars and public discussions, as well as cross-trainings and operations.
- 5) Equipment and arms. India has many options for supplying the countries of WIOR with cheaper military equipment. Helicopters, patrol boats, navy and army radars, night-vision devices, clothing and shoes, and motor transport of various kinds. India should consider setting up a Defence Expert Company, with offices in WIOR countries like Mauritius, Seychelles, Mozambique, Kenya and Tanzania, with adequate military and civilian representation.
- 6) Miscellaneous areas should be explored: sports, adventure, youth leaders' programmes, medical management, info-tech, logistics management, flight safety, exchange of books and periodicals, as well as naval hydrography for survey, and delineation of EEZs.
- 7) Technical assistance for maintenance of equipment, workshops, dock facilities, repair of boats, guns, tanks, aircraft and any other such issues.

Recommendations and Conclusion

- 8) Specialisation training to WIOR countries in areas like medicine, engineering, management, and hydrography by India's especially established schools and colleges. Other specialised endeavours may be given due attention, including research, satellite imagery interpretation, ship building, jungle warfare, and mountain warfare.
- 9) Naval/maritime cooperation as earlier discussed, but expanded to include more ship visits, more time in harbour for enhanced interaction, hydrography, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and information exchange, and EEZ patrols. 

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