

Citation: Schottli, Jivanta (2020) Security and Growth for All in the Indian Ocean. Maritime Governance and India's Foreign Policy. *India Review*, Volume 18, 2019 - Issue 5: Special Issue: Opening the Black Box: The Making of India's Foreign Policy.

DOI: <https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1703366>

Note: This is the accepted manuscript; before copy editing & formatting by the publisher.

Email: jivanta.schottli@dcu.ie (ORCID ID: [0000-0002-4658-1483](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4658-1483))

Security and Growth for All in the Indian Ocean – Maritime Governance and India's Foreign Policy.

Jivanta Schottli

Abstract

In a March 2015 speech delivered in Mauritius, India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined what he described was India's vision for the Indian Ocean Region. Under the acronym, SAGAR or 'Security and Growth for All in the Region', five key points were elucidated. Using the concept of maritime governance, the paper examines the actions and rhetoric of Indian policy-makers since 2015 and before, to analyse India's contribution to building institutions and arrangements for maritime order. Examining three recent developments, the paper highlights India's growing capacity to behave and deliver outcomes, as a major oceanic player as well as the structural constraints, limiting its room to manoeuvre. It argues that rather than ideas, institutions or individuals, it is the intensification of a core dilemma that is driving change in Indian foreign policy.

Introduction: India and the Ocean.

India has a 7,500 kilometres coastline and island chains reaching far out into the Indian Ocean, with the Andaman and Nicobar islands just 175 kilometres away from Indonesia's Aceh province. Both to the East and West of India are crucial sea lines of communication linking the

country to the global economy. Given that more than 90 per cent of the country's oil comes by sea, from the Gulf and per cent of India's economy is export-driven today, with the bulk transported via ships, it is not surprising that the 2017-18 MEA report states, "The Indian Ocean region remains a priority and an important cornerstone of India's diplomatic engagements".¹ The report goes on to claim that following the Prime Minister's articulation of a strategic vision in Mauritius 2015, there has been a 'qualitative transformation' in India's engagement with the Indian Ocean region.² The statement is qualified by reference to substantive progress achieved within The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), on maritime security as part of bilateral relations with the littoral states and India's growing contribution to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts. In other words, India is cast as being supportive of multilateralism³, a promoter of collaborative networks for capacity-building and a 'first responder' to crises, indicating clearly India's aspirations to emerge and be regarded as a net security provider⁴.

Despite the obvious and compelling reasons for India to have and play a major maritime role, India's foreign policy and security concerns have tended to be predominantly continental and territorial. To some extent this has been the result of a path set in place during the early decades after independence when India faced challenges on its territorial borders, with Pakistan and China and even Bangladesh following its creation in 1971. Furthermore, the security concerns for the government were predominantly internal, reflecting India's limited external role and interests but also the violent and difficult processes, facing the new nation-state that was transitioning into a federal, democratic republic. Borders continue to be contested and unresolved, both with Pakistan and China and states boundaries within India have been changed as recently as March 2014 when Telengana became the 29th state of the Union of India. At the same time, India's maritime interests have grown exponentially. This is an outcome that is emanating endogenously from India's economic growth story and vulnerability as a peninsular state as well as reflecting the compulsions arising from a geo-strategic environment that is challenging and opening up opportunities for India's leadership.

¹ MEA Annual Report 2017-18, p. iii. http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/29788_MEA-AR-2017-18-03-02-2018.pdf

² Ibid.

³ The IORA charter's states the Association's fundamental principles, in the 'spirit of multilateralism'.

⁴ India's revised, 2015 maritime military strategy titled, 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' refers for the first time explicitly to India's intent to be a 'net security provider'. See page 8 of the document available at: https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

While the government tries hard to project a ‘qualitative transformation’ in India’s maritime diplomacy, scholars continue to argue that India lags behind in effectively using its marine resources and in terms of formulating a grand strategic direction⁵. In fact this ties in with a long-running debate over the role that strategy has played and plays in the making of India’s foreign policy. At one extreme is the provocative and now infamous proposition by George Tanham in a 1996 RAND publication and his analysis of “India’s relative lack of strategic thinking”⁶. Others have depicted phases of Indian foreign policy as essentially ad hoc, reactive and lacking in strategic direction⁷. Most recently, a debate on the determinants of Indian foreign policy has been rekindled, with the 2014 election of a Bharatiya Janata Party-majority government and the active role and interest that the Prime Minister has taken in India’s foreign policy and his claim to be turning towards a more pragmatic, transactional foreign policy. Some have argued that in the case of the BJP, ideology plays an important role, given the emphasis on *Hindutva* by the BJP and its supporting organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. However, others discount the claims about change given the constraining forces of institutions and domestic compulsions. This paper argues that strategy emerges out of a two-level game, where external and domestic calculations have to be simultaneously calibrated. In pursuing this balancing act, strategies must change according to the situation. Hence, it is proposed that to label Indian foreign policy in terms of binaries such as realist or idealist is not helpful. Rather the combining of idealism and realism, of value-driven and instrumental rationality, as a strategic response, is what defines every political act and decision⁸.

Maritime governance offers an important lens through which to examine India’s engagement with the world given the high stakes involved of, domestic needs on the one hand (energy imports, trade, port development) and external drivers on the other (geo-politics, balance of power). India’s economy is projected to grow larger and larger but the need to deliver jobs and poverty-alleviation will continue, for a long time to be the number one priority for policy-

⁵ See for instance: “Foreign Policy and Sea Power: India’s Maritime Role Flux” by Zorawar Daulet Singh *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, October-December 2017, pp. 21-49; David Brewster “India and the Persian Gulf: Locked out or staying out?”, *Comparative Strategy*, Volume 35, 2016 - Issue 1

⁶ See Tanham, George, K., *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND: National Defense Research Institute, 1992, page 1.

<http://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf>

⁷ See for instance the analysis of Indira Gandhi’s foreign policy by Sumit Ganguly in “Structure and Agency in the Making of Indian Foreign Policy”, *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 116 – 21 November 2010.

⁸ The argument here differs from that made in Chatterjee Miller and Sullivan de Estrada’s paper which paints a picture of incremental change in foreign policy making due to the ‘homage’ paid to ‘entrenched institutionalised ideas and ideational frameworks’. “Pragmatism in Indian foreign policy: how ideas constrain Modi”, *International Affairs* 93: 1 (2017), p. 49

makers and a key motivating force behind the country's economic diplomacy. The inevitable and concomitant need to develop and improve access to markets, investments and resources of other countries, in a context of growing competition and opportunities for collaboration, makes the external domain of maritime diplomacy a highly topical one.

It is of interest to note that until not so long ago, the plethora of official documents pertaining to maritime security and strategy paid scant attention to India's role in the Indian Ocean. Thus for instance, the 2015 new maritime strategy of the United States, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea power" made next to no mention of India, despite importance accorded to the 'Indo-Asia-Pacific'⁹. Similarly, despite being located in the Indian Ocean, Australia's 2010 Maritime Doctrine does not mention India¹⁰. To some extent this echoes a blind spot in foreign policy analysis, which has a problem examining behaviour and decisions that are regarded as 'sub-optimal'¹¹. Thus a country like India, despite its physical centrality and locational advantages in the Indian Ocean, was regarded as failing to act in the ways and using the means expected, given its size¹². To avoid this path of analysis, the paper argues there is a need to understand the logic and reasons for both decisions implemented and apparent indecisiveness in India's policies towards the ocean.

Today in contrast, it is hard to overlook the extensive literature on how crucial (retrospectively) the Indian Ocean has always been to the global economy, how important it currently is¹³ and likely to remain¹⁴. According to the current Indian Ocean Rim Association website, half the world's container ships, one-third of its bulk cargo traffic, two-thirds of its oil shipments and more than 50 per cent of the world's maritime oil trade passes through the Indian Ocean¹⁵. The Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), the arteries of world trade, need protection from piracy and states are increasingly vying to establish greater control over the key choke points and

⁹ <http://www.navy.mil/local/maritime/150227-CS21R-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Amd2010.pdf>

¹¹ See for instance the article by David A. Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy" in *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 2000. 3:167–82

¹² A classic example is Stephen Cohen's depiction of 'India is always destined to be "emerging" but never actually arriving' (Cohen 2001: 2)

¹³ See for example, David Brewster *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (2014), Robert D. Kaplan *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (2010), Raja Mohan Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific (2012); For historical studies see: Edward A. Alpers *The Indian Ocean in World History* (2013), Sanjeev Sanyal *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* (2016)

¹⁴ As suggested by various reports and books published and conferences on the 'Blue Economy'. For example the upcoming 2018 UNDP-supported global Ministerial Conference held in Kenya on the *Blue Economy and the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development*.

¹⁵ <http://www.iora.int/en/about/about-iora> Last Accessed on 21 August 2018.

entry channels into the Indian Ocean or to enhance their ‘listening capabilities’ to monitor movements across the ocean. Within this context, India’s contribution, past and present, to institution-building and maritime governance in the Indian Ocean has been increasingly recognised. The first section therefore that follows below, examines the creation of two maritime institutions where India played an important leadership role: the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC), precursor to today’s Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA, in 1997 and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, a regional forum of Indian Ocean littoral states, represented by their Navy chiefs, in 2008.

Section two looks at choices made, reflecting the government’s strategy vis-à-vis maritime governance. Three cases are explored in detail, where decisions were recently taken, to further institutionalise India’s role and presence in the Indian Ocean. These are the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Republic of Seychelles on the Development of Facilities on Assumption Island in Seychelles and the Memorandum of Understanding for the Improvement in Sea and Air Transportation Facilities at Agalega Island of Mauritius, both on 11 March 2015 and the steps taken to give the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ greater legitimacy.

The analysis provided reveals the constant push and pull factors that decision makers must navigate in formulating policy. It took a decade long of negotiations to move forward on maritime strategic cooperation with the United States and then in March 2018 a similar logistics support agreement was signed with France. On India’s investments in Chabahar the government was amongst the first to enter into a deal with post-sanctions Iran and yet the uncertainty following President Trump’s policies towards Iran has meant little progress on the ground. In dealing with the ocean island states, despite India’s long-time presence in the western Indian Ocean and close defence relations with both Seychelles and Mauritius, efforts to shore up access to land and naval-related facilities, hit a roadblock in both cases. Section three summarizes the proposition that it is not simply path dependency or ‘institutionalised ideational frameworks’ acting as constraints¹⁶ but rather the dynamic effort to find corners, interstices and opportunities within a dense framework of policy-making that makes for gradual adaptation.

India and Maritime Governance

¹⁶ Chatterjee Miller and Sullivan de Estrada (2017), p. 29.

Maritime governance is used here as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of efforts aimed at enhancing law and order at sea, the premises for delivering security and growth to a region. This encompasses the more commonly used terminology of “maritime partnership”, which tends to have a security connotation. The word, governance is more comprehensive, encompassing practices and processes that generate a legitimation of authority and rule-based behaviour. As an analytical tool, it draws attention to the question of ‘who governs’ especially in the context of the oceans, which brings together various levels and arenas of legal responsibilities and institutions.

Aside from the various international legal regimes and maritime-related organisations that exist, there are two Indian Ocean-specific institutions, which India is credited with having played a major part in creating and providing leadership. While the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC) was set up with economic objectives in mind, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, or ‘IONS’ was a maritime security, naval initiative. Both classify as regional organisations with membership based on countries littoral to, or within, the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, both initiatives aimed at promoting sectoral collaboration, in the process promoting awareness about, and bestowing greater coherence to, the region. The two initiatives also represented efforts by India, at different points in time, to raise the country’s maritime profile and influence.

IOR-ARC and IONS: building a region.

Formed in 1997, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC) came into being thanks to a joint initiative of South Africa, India, Australia and Mauritius. Projecting an ambitious vision, the aim was to enhance economic co-operation by stimulating intra-regional trade and investment, synergising competitive advantages in commodities, manufacturing and services, collection, classification and distribution of data and information, establishing a network among Indian Ocean Region (IOR) countries and promoting standardisation and harmonisation in data, statistics and procedures. Unlike organisations such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Forum (APEC), the proposed IOR-ARC did not, however, rest upon an existing record of economic interaction among the foreseen members. Furthermore, the sheer diversity in geography, culture and economic development made it appear an unrealistic and unwieldy entity.

Each of the four countries at the forefront in conceptualising and spearheading the formation of the IOR-ARC, had strategic incentives for doing so. In India's case, the collapse of the Soviet Union forced a review of foreign policy and strategic outlook, prompting the country to come to terms with the need to carve out a space and develop allegiances within a multi-polar world. During the mid-1990s, this entailed an emphasis on improving relations in the near neighbourhood¹⁷. After India's application to join APEC was turned down in 1991, the IOR-ARC gained further relevance and the decision to support its formation was billed as part of India's evolving "Look East" policy. This coincided with a new assertiveness on the part of South Africa. Breaking free from the constraints of apartheid, South Africa sought to cast its influence beyond the immediate region. In 1995, then president Nelson Mandela stated, 'The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic co-operation and other peaceful endeavours.' In fact, the idea is said to have taken root during a visit of former South African Foreign Minister, Pik Botha, to India in November 1993, and cemented during the subsequent presidential visit of Nelson Mandela to India in January 1995.

At first, an Indian Ocean Rim Initiative was formed by South Africa and India, with the assistance of Australia and Mauritius. Australia, at the time was "looking west" and seeking to expand markets, while Mauritius, sensing an opportunity, was keen to host the IOR-ARC headquarters, with the secretariat based in the capital, Port Louis. In March 1997, the IOR-ARC was formally launched, with seven additional countries as members: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Yemen, Tanzania, Madagascar and Mozambique. Since 1997, the IOR-ARC has met regularly but assessments broadly agree that few tangible results have ensued. Business and civil society networks have been set up but over time faded away or collapsed, generating, in the process, a number of parallel organisations, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group, the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum and the Working Group on Trade and Investment.

The importance given to developing India's maritime capacity was also reflected in the country's resource allocation for the purpose of developing a 'Blue Water' navy. Hence while the overall armed forces budget grew at an annual rate of 5% from 2001 to 2005 and at around 10% from 2005 to 2008, the navy's share of the increasing defence budget rose from 11% in

¹⁷ Under the supervision of then External Affairs Minister, Inder Kumal Gujral, this was given a priority and even nicknamed the "Gujral Doctrine".

1992/93 to 18% in 2008/09¹⁸. Reflecting the next stage in expanding India's maritime clout, was the growing role of the Indian navy in maritime diplomacy. A culmination of this can be seen in 2008 with the multilateral Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, bringing together Chiefs of Navies and Heads of Maritime Security Organisations from the island and littoral states of the Indian Ocean. No less than 27 countries were represented at the inaugural IONS, including France (which India recognises as a littoral state by virtue of its colonial territories), but interestingly, at the time neither Britain nor the United States (notwithstanding their presence in the British Indian Ocean Territory). Today the IONS website lists 35 members¹⁹ and since 2008 there have been four more gatherings at two yearly intervals in the United Arab Emirates (2010), South Africa (2012), Australia (2014), Bangladesh (2016) and Iran (2018).

Notably, and unlike IORA, Pakistan is a member of IONS having joined in 2014²⁰. The forum therefore provides one of the few opportunities for Indian and Pakistani naval communities to meet. Overall, IONS is credited for providing a forum for the exchange of views and as a valuable platform for synergising resources and energies towards the maintenance of 'good order' in the Indian Ocean. What is interesting to note however, is that despite India's growing maritime interest and capacity, there were tensions in 2008 between the Indian Navy and the Foreign Ministry that came to the fore, over the navy's growing role and profile. Thus it is reported by scholars, that the decision not to get involved in the 2008 anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, reflected a major point of disagreement between the two governmental actors²¹. Although India also began anti-piracy missions in and around the Gulf of Aden at the time, maritime security collaboration with the EU remained limited²². This according to observers, looks set to change as both the EU and India consider the potential of their strategic collaboration in a new light²³. The annual EU-India Summits are back on track, restarting in 2016 after a four-year gap, agendas have been announced and strategies are in the pipeline. While credit may be given to the new actors in place it must also be recognised that the world appears quite different in 2018 than it did in 2008, which was the last time that the permanent

¹⁸See Brewster, p. 3: <https://www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Documents/vol6no3Brewster.pdf>

¹⁹ It is not clear whether the United Kingdom has attained Observer status.

²⁰ In the case of IORA, Pakistan is unable to join until it grants Most Favoured Nation status to India as all members need to have this status according to the organisation's rules.

²¹ See Brewster, p. 4 <https://www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Documents/vol6no3Brewster.pdf>

²² <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/EU-India-Security-Cooperation.pdf>

²³ Garim Mohan, "Politics Over Trade: A Revival of the EU-India Partnership", *Global Public Policy Institute*, 27 August 2018.

five Security Council members voted unanimously on the Piracy and Armed Robbery resolution.

India's 'new' maritime engagement.

Island politics – Mauritius and Seychelles

In March 2015 Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched his maritime initiative by visiting three Indian Ocean island states – Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka. Arriving in Seychelles, Modi's visit marked the first by an Indian prime minister in 34 years. In Mauritius, Narendra Modi attended the programme to mark the commissioning of the Barracuda, a ship in the service of the National Coast Guard of Mauritius and used the occasion to announce India's five-point vision for the Indian Ocean region or SAGAR. The first principle articulated the need to secure India's mainland and island territories and defend its maritime interests, secondly, the need to deepen security cooperation with regional partners; thirdly, build multilateral and cooperative maritime security arrangements; fourthly, pursue sustainable economic development and, fifthly recognise the role of extra-regional and major power interests in the Indian Ocean.

However, despite articulating a vision and pursuing a strategy of maritime engagement, the case of Seychelles and Mauritius highlight a number of constraints to translating aspiration and ambition into action. In the case of Seychelles, an archipelago of 115 islands, India has long played a key role developing the country's military capacity by providing monetary support, equipment and training to the Seychelles People's Defence Forces (SPDF). In April 2012, during a visit by then-Indian President, Pratibha Patil, then-President James Michel described his country as a "rock of dependability" for India and thanked India for its help in protecting the country's vast exclusive economic zone from piracy²⁴. Dating back to the 1980s, the Indian navy has played a role in Seychellois domestic politics, helping to avert a coup against the government, and in the country's national security apparatus. Thanks to the Indian diaspora population (more than 10 per cent of the total population), there is also a sense of ethnic affinity, although this pales in comparison with Mauritius, a neighbouring Indian Ocean Island state

²⁴ "Seychelles says it would be 'rock of dependability' for India", *The Hindu*, 30 April 2012. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/seychelles-says-it-would-be-rock-of-dependability-for-india/article3370486.ece>. Accessed on 24 June 2018.

where more than 68 per cent of the population is of Indian origin. There has long been a sense amongst Indian leaders of this region being part of a natural sphere of influence for India²⁵.

On the March 2015 bilateral visit, Modi was accompanied by both the Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. The two countries signed memoranda of understanding on renewable energy, hydrography, a protocol agreement on the sale of navigational charts and the development of facilities on Assumption Island. Interestingly, while details were released about an MoU pertaining to the development of infrastructure on another island – Agalega in Mauritius – no details were publicly available at the time, on the “Agreement on the Development of Facilities on Assumption Island”, save for a reference in the Indian Ministry for External Affairs’ text describing India-Seychelles relations. Soon after Modi’s visit, the local press and opposition figures picked up reports that were circulating in the Indian media about the islands having been leased to India. This caused a major controversy, prompting the Chief of Staff of the SPDF, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Rosette, to deny the allegations.

A new agreement was subsequently signed on 27 January 2018. Compared with the 2015 version, (both were leaked online in March 2018 in a major security breach), key changes were made. The 2018 document is much longer; validity of the agreement was extended from 10 to 20 years, with provisions for renewal after every decade. The preamble in the revised agreement places the initiative with Seychelles for requesting support and cooperation from India to develop the facilities. Article 1 of the 2018 agreement specifies that the infrastructure will be on “a designated part of the island” while the 2015 text made no such distinction, referring instead to the entire Assumption Island. The new agreement also clearly mentions that the Seychelles will continue to own the island and that the newly developed facilities will be jointly managed with India. As originally planned, a Joint Project Monitoring Committee responsible for the implementation of the project was envisioned, but the 2018 version introduces modifications in its composition, adding as co-chair, the Seychelles Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, along with the Indian High Commissioner. Article 6 on ‘The Management, Administration, Operation and Maintenance of the Facilities’, which in 2016 was a single paragraph, is the most detailed section in the 2018 version.

²⁵ In the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Mauritius, Indira Gandhi referred to the country as “Chhota Bharat”, a phrase that was meant affectionately to refer to the country as a smaller version of India. It was used again by Modi in 2015.

The ‘new’ agreement appeared to be on track but just before being introduced into the Seychelles National Assembly for ratification, a YouTube video appeared online, alleging the island had been sold to India, along with links to three folders containing the entire texts of the 2018 final agreement, the 2015 agreement and a “secret side letter” on the conditions under which Indian military personnel would operate on the island.²⁶ On 20 March 2018, Seychelles opposition leader, Wavel Ramkalawn, stated categorically that his party, the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS), “has nothing more to do with the Assumption agreement. Secondly, [the] LDS will not ratify the agreement on Assumption and thirdly where [the] LDS is concerned the agreement on Assumption is dead.”²⁷ The LDS has held a majority in the National Assembly since 2016 and it is reportedly the first time that the opposition is at loggerheads with the government on a policy issue. In a press conference on 5 June 2018, the President announced that the deal was no longer up for discussion, not at home nor with India, in his upcoming state visit.²⁸ The latest twist on 25 June 2018 came with both Modi and Faure stating their countries were willing to work on the Assumption Island project, keeping each other’s concerns in mind.

Similarly, in the case of Mauritius despite having a relationship that has been described by some politicians, as sacred the issue of gaining or developing India’s investments in strategic infrastructure has been a sensitive issue. The Agalega Islands located about 1,000 kilometres north of Mauritius, comprise a northern and southern island. Both are Mauritian dependencies, with a total land area of about 70 square kilometres and a population of a few hundred people. A major controversy over the Agalega Islands erupted in 2006 when reports appeared in Indian and Mauritian papers about plans to cede the twin islands to India. Then-Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam had to categorically issue a denial in the Mauritian parliament, stating that the “Government of India was willing to develop an economic development plan for the islands”. However, leaked Wikileaks cables from that time revealed that the US also believed at the time that India was pursuing a geo-strategically-motivated “hidden agenda” vis-à-vis the islands²⁹.

²⁶ “Assumption (Seychelles Islands)”, *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOwG9JhRZxE>. Accessed on 25 June 2018.

²⁷ “Opposition in Seychelles says it won’t support military base deal with India”, *Seychelles News Agency*, 20 March 2018. <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/8864/Opposition+in+Seychelles+says+it+won%27t+support+military+base+deal+with+India>. Accessed on 25 June 2018.

²⁸ “President of Seychelles: New foreign worker quota system; Indian military base proposal dead”, *Seychelles News Agency*, 5 June 2018. <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/9246/President+of+Seychelles+New+foreign+worker+quota+system%3B+Indian+military+base+proposal+dead>. Accessed on 26 June 2018.

²⁹ Public Library of US Diplomacy, Wikileaks. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PORTLOUIS752_a.html. Accessed on 6 August 2018.

During Prime Minister Modi's visit, a memorandum of understanding was signed to develop the island. Once again, the issue escalated into a political storm over whether or not a lease agreement had been signed; whether or not a dual-purpose coastal surveillance radar station was being considered. Clarifications had to be issued in the Mauritian parliament that a financial grant would be provided by the Indian government primarily with the aim of improving life on the island for local inhabitants and developing the island's economic potential. This included upgrading the existing jetty, dating from 1985, rehabilitation and repaving of a runway so bigger aircraft could land; installation of a power generation facility, a water desalination plant and construction of a national coast guard post. On 27 May 2017, during Mauritian Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth's state visit to India, an agreement was signed titled "Maritime Security within the Framework of Project Agalega". Details about the agreement are however unavailable and on Kovind's visit in March 2018, despite announcing yet another new line of credit of US\$100 million for defence procurement, a multi-purpose offshore patrol vessel and an additional grant component of US\$5 million, no mention was made of the Agalega project. Nonetheless, in a media briefing, prior to the Indian president's departure, India's joint secretary of the Indian Ocean Region division, responded to a question on the status of the project, saying it had moved forward to "the implementation phase"³⁰.

Great Power Diplomacy – rise of the 'Indo-Pacific'.

President Barack Obama's January 2015 visit marked the first time that an American president was invited as Chief Guest for Indian Republic Day, and in accepting, President Obama became the first US president to visit India twice during his time in office. Three documents were issued, including a declaration of friendship and a commitment to regular summits; a joint statement called "Shared Effort, Progress for All" and; a joint strategic vision statement for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. The third document was unusual in openly describing convergence between the two countries on strategic goals namely regional connectivity, freedom of navigation and collective security. The two countries expressed their concern over the South China Sea and the need to "pursue resolution of territorial and maritime

³⁰ "Transcript of Media Briefing on visit of President to Mauritius and Madagascar (March 09, 2018)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 March 2018. <http://www.mea.gov.in/mediabriefings.htm?dtl/29594/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+on+visit+of+President+to+Mauritius+and+Madagascar+March+09+2018>. Accessed on 5 August 2018

disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”³¹

Since 2015, two joint statements have followed and a number of actions to further deepen and institutionalise what has been described by policy-makers and observers as, ‘strategic convergence’³². In June 2016 Prime Minister Modi was an official guest at the White House and a statement titled, “The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century” was issued³³. About a year later, Prime Minister Modi met with the newly elected President, Donald Trump, also on an official visit, resulting in a statement that was described as toned down but which continued previous references to “a growing strategic convergence” bolstered by military, maritime and intelligence cooperation³⁴. In this, the maritime dynamic and dimension is palpable, captured by the growing use, dissemination and acceptance of the term, “Indo-Pacific”³⁵. The 2017 statement referred to the US and India having common objectives in the ‘Indo-Pacific region’³⁶; the Indo-Pacific region was also given priority, in the government’s December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), over five other areas, including the Middle East and Europe³⁷.

In India, the term has been used widely within the strategic community. For example, the Chiefs of four navies – Australia, Japan, India and the United States (known informally as the Quadrilateral grouping) – spoke on a single panel at the 2018 Raisina Dialogue, New Delhi’s flagship conference on geopolitics and foreign policy, with the Indo-Pacific as its official theme. In fact already in 2015, India’s own maritime strategy document observed, “The shift in worldview from a Euro-Atlantic to an Indo-Pacific focus and the repositioning of global economic and military power towards Asia has resulted in significant political, economic and social changes in the Indian Ocean Region and impacted India’s maritime environment in

³¹http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24728/USIndia_Joint_Strategic_Vision_for_the_AsiaPacific_and_Indian_Ocean_Region

³²See for example: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Indo-US-%E2%80%99strategic-convergence%E2%80%99-at-highest-point-Obama-administration/article17040357.ece> Last Accessed on 21 August 2018 and David Scott, “The “Indo-Pacific” — New Regional Formulations and New Maritime Frameworks for US-India Strategic Convergence”, *Asia-Pacific Review* Volume 19, 2012 - Issue 2

³³ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st>

³⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-india-prosperity-partnership/> Last Accessed on 21 August 2018.

³⁵ For a discussion of the optimism and skepticism regarding the Indo-US ‘maritime partnership’ see the article by Abhuijit Singh, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/searching-for-a-high-note-in-the-u-s-india-maritime-partnership/> Last Accessed on 21 August 2018.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> Last Accessed on 21 August 2018.

tangible ways.”³⁸ In some ways therefore, the shift in jargon marks a move towards a terminological preference held by India, so much so that Narendra Modi’s keynote speech at the inter-governmental security meeting, the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, carried a total of 11 references to the ‘Indo-Pacific’.³⁹

Since March 2015, when Modi announced a vision of SAGAR, concrete actions to enhance India’s capacity to deliver maritime governance have followed through. Strategic agreements have been reached with key littoral states, including Indonesia, where the jointly issued ‘Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ carried a reference to improving connectivity between the strategically-located Sabang Island of Indonesia and India’s Port Blair. Prior to that, Modi’s visit to Oman in February 2018 was another example of increasing India’s visibility and access in the western Indian Ocean region. In addition, crucial steps have been taken to reach agreements that provide India with the use of American and French bases across the length and breadth of the unified maritime expanse that constitutes the idea of the ‘Indo-Pacific’. These mark significant developments in India’s maritime diplomacy.

Unlike the United States (US) or Britain, however, Indian policymakers refrain from describing island infrastructural projects in terms of plans for a military base, preferring instead to use the term ‘facility’. This reflects the country’s own particular attitude towards the construction of military bases that is associated with the 19th century approach of Britain which involved setting up a network of military bases around the world to sustain a global empire, a model replicated later by the US. Instead, Indian diplomats like to emphasise the norms of collaboration and cooperation, projected under the rubric of SAGAR and enshrined in agreements like the 2018 version of the Assumption Island deal. This provides India with a distinctive and effective strategy of oceanic outreach to enhance and maintain a global maritime presence that is also potentially more responsive to the inevitable sensitivities and politics surrounding the development and use of overseas ‘facilities’.

Conclusion: The Constraints to India’s Maritime Aspirations.

³⁸ See page ii.

³⁹<https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018> Last Accessed on 21 August 2018.

In 2017 the US National Defense Authorization Act was codified in which a section of the bill declared India a major defence partner, directing the secretaries of defence and state to take steps to enhance military and security ties with India. To take advantage of this, India needed to conclude three foundational pacts that enable greater interoperability between critical technologies and smooth facilitation of classified information. So far, India has signed only one, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, after a long phase of negotiations. LEMOA was an 'India-specific' version of the more broadly applied Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), enabling access to each other's military facilities for purposes of refuelling and replenishment. The Communications, Compatibility, Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA) are the two remaining pacts that have not yet been signed. It was feared that these agreements would compromise India's principle of 'strategic autonomy', jeopardise military ties with Russia and access to their weaponry systems as well as endanger mission security while employing US-supplied equipment, which for example, Pakistan may have also had access to.

Currently, reports suggest India is poised to sign COMCASA with the United States after nearly 15 years of negotiations, enabling the transfer of advanced secure and encrypted communication systems. It is speculated that this will be done at the inaugural '2+2 meeting' in New Delhi between India's defence and foreign ministers, Nirmala Sitharaman and Sushma Swaraj, and their US counterparts, James Mattis and Mike Pompeo, scheduled for September 2018. This marks another level of institutionalising the defence relationship and is in fact, like the existing Maritime Security Dialogue, the only 2+2 dialogue that India has with any country.

India is also diversifying and deepening its defence relations through agreements with other major players and stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific. In March 2018 India concluded a basing agreement with France. While India has a coastline of 7,500 kilometres, more than 1,380 islands and an exclusive maritime economic zone of two million square km, French territory in the Indo-Pacific region includes 1.6 million citizens, approximately 7,000 permanent French military personnel and an exclusive economic zone of 9.1 sq. km. France, which sees itself as a resident Indo-Pacific power, retains the islands of Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean and New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the South Pacific. France has long maintained a military base in Djibouti and has political and economic ties with the island states of the

Western Indian Ocean and the South Pacific⁴⁰. As with the United States, India has also signed a ‘White Shipping Agreement’ with France, which enhances maritime domain awareness by allowing navies from either side to exchange information initially about white (commercial) ships, later leading to further exchanges of information about grey (military) vessels and black (illegal) vessels.

Both India and China, big countries with large ethnic diasporas and historically endowed cultural spheres of influence, are discovering the challenges that come with ‘doing’ great power politics. The development of island infrastructure has come to be seen as a euphemism for the development of strategic assets, even in the case of Assumption Island where, as it transpired, the aim of building residential barracks for the Seychelles coast guard, improving a jetty and an existing air strip appear rather innocuous. India is also increasingly confronted with the dilemma of straddling its identity and interests on the one hand, as a leader amongst developing countries, institutionalised in the coalition of Group of 77, and on the other, as a major power faced with a complex geo-strategic environment in the Indian Ocean. It is this dilemma and the strategies to address it – not the ideological compulsions or individual personalities and domestic politics alone – that provide a dynamic momentum for change in foreign policy.

⁴⁰ <https://carnegieindia.org/2018/02/23/deepening-india-france-maritime-partnership-pub-75630>