

INDO-FRENCH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean is emerging in the 21st century's hot battleground not just for regional countries like India, and China but also for the European nations, particularly France. France has overseas territories in Asia-Pacific impelling France to become the resident power. Moreover, France has been continuously engaging in the activities of the Indian Ocean to achieve the objective of securing Sea Lines of Communications and counter the increasing influence of China with the help of India in the region. Both France and India are engaging on many fronts ranging from the maritime partnership to the defense and security pacts. France currently is the second largest defense partner of India. In the recent past, India received 26 Rafael jets for its air force from France, and 39 more marine versions of Rafael were also handed over to the Indian Navy. Both countries also signed agreements to share the diesel submarines. India has still to receive the last diesel submarines from France under project 75. While keeping the close relations between Paris and New Delhi and latter's proximity with Pakistan resulted in security and military threats. The strategic partnership between India and France has geo-strategic geopolitical and geo-economic challenges for Pakistan. This paper, thus, aims to explore these challenges for Pakistan. The method employed for this research is a mixed method in which both primary and secondary data was used to conduct this study.

Keywords: India, France, Pakistan, Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Strategic Competition, Maritime Rafael.

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1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean region holds economic and geopolitical importance, serving as a crucial trading and energy route with a large marine expanse. Regional and international players' strategic competition and cooperation in this area have a vital impact on the security and stability of surrounding countries, particularly Pakistan. France's and other European nations' geopolitical moves make clear how important the Indian Ocean is for major and regional powers.

Robert Kaplan, in his instructive book entitled *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, accurately analyzes the significance of the Indian Ocean (IO). The researcher argues that while World War I and World War II were primarily centered on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the 21st century is expected to be oriented toward the Indian Ocean¹. Domination of the Indian Ocean is viewed as a prerequisite for major powers. India, therefore, has been forging alliances to counter China's growing influence in the IO. New Delhi is also a major partner of the Quad, a group consisting of four democratic countries—the US, Japan, India, and Australia—dedicated to promoting democratic values and securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC). India is well-known for not putting all its eggs in one basket; it is diversifying its strategic options by working with France to promote an inclusive, open, peaceful, and secure Indian Ocean aimed at safeguarding both economic and security interests. France stands out among European nations for its active role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), driven by its initiatives to secure its SLOCs, disseminate French culture, and foster positive relations with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean.²

France has extended an invitation to India for cooperation to achieve the above-mentioned outlined objectives. France and India have had cordial ties since India attained independence. India is the second-most profitable market for French Defense goods, behind Russia. New Delhi helped France to become a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a coalition of countries led by India that deals mostly with IOR policy. Two French overseas territories in the Indian Ocean, Reunion Island and Mayotte, played a vital role in the nation's admittance. It is noteworthy to mention here that 10% of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) within (IOR) is claimed by France. Currently, France is the resident power and has the second-highest EEZ behind the US in the Indian Ocean³.

Being the largest littoral state in the region, India has leveraged its strategic location to its advantage. Its foreign policy frameworks, such as the *Look East*, *Act East*, and *Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)* policies, have strengthened India's strategic engagement with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These initiatives reflect India's growing strategic focus on the IOR. In alignment with these policies, India has

¹ Kaplan, R.D. (2011). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the future of American Power*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks

² Saint-Mézard, I. (2016). The French strategic vision of the Indian Ocean. In *Power, Politics and Maritime Governance in the Indian Ocean*, pp. 53-68. Routledge.

³ Haldar, S. (2022) Mapping Indo-French synergy in the Indian Ocean Region: towards a calibrated Indo-Pacific. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 18(1), 21-35.

extended financial, diplomatic, and security assistance to several Indian Ocean littoral states, including Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Furthermore, India has also provided lines of credit to various African nations, in addition to its regional neighbors, to promote regional connectivity and maritime cooperation⁴.

Against this backdrop, India benefits from the presence of Western countries in the Indian Ocean. India and France can use each other's ports in the region due to several military and civilian agreements.

India and France signed bilateral agreements as well. In 2005, the two countries collaborated on the \$3.75 billion Indian Navy "Project 75," which facilitated technology transfer and mandated that India purchase six diesel-powered Scorpène class submarines for its fleet in the Indian Ocean. Signing multiple agreements, Prime Minister Modi traveled to France. This deal will lead to joint surface shipbuilding efforts between the Naval Group of France and Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Limited of India⁵. In a similar vein, the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) of India and Safran of France will work together to develop the combat aircraft engine. The main objective of these agreements is the purchase of 26 Marine Rafale Jets, which will strengthen India's armed forces generally and the Indian Navy specifically. Interestingly, India's September 2016 procurement of 36 Rafale jets differs greatly from its current order. The Indian Air Force already operates Rafael aircraft⁶.

As a result, the Indo-French Strategic Partnership in the Indian Ocean is a dynamic and evolving alliance causing foreseeable repercussions for Pakistan. Rafael from India is likely to be used against Pakistan in a conflict-ridden environment to maintain tensions between the nuclear-armed Asian countries giving relative gain to India vis-à-vis Pakistan. In this context, the former Indian Air Force Chief BS Dhanoa stated on February 27, 2019, that India would have sunk three to four aircraft carriers if it had been able to use Rafael, he alluded to the threat's intended outcome. This paper attempts to figure out the potential threats for Pakistan causing by the Indo-French partnership particularly in the Indian Ocean Region.

2. Research Methodology

The data gathered to conduct this research comprises a mixed method in which primary and secondary sources such as books, scholarly articles, and press releases of respective countries' external affairs are consulted. Interviews with experts in the field of Asia-Pacific are conducted to explore the cooperation and confrontation in the region. Three broader themes were taken from the interviewer's interview which include geopolitical, geo-economics, and geostrategic. Moreover, it further divided these three themes into different subthemes.

⁴ Racine, J. L. (2021). The Indo–French strategic dialogue: bilateralism and world perceptions. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 25(4), 57-191.

⁵ Sinha, S. (2023). India's Military Modernization: Role and Impact of France. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 10(3), 325-341.

⁶ Bharti, M. S. (2023). Indo–French Defence and Security Partnership. *Medzinarodne vzťahy (Journal of International Relations)*, 21(2) (2023): 155-172.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory of structural realism is applied as a theoretical framework for this study. The theory posits that the international order is anarchic and each country is responsible for its security and survival. There is no overarching authority in the international arena. Given the international structure compelling states to go for the maximization of power. Putting this in perspective, both India and France face the intensification of Chinese activities in the region as security and military threats to their interests in the region. In order to curb the growing influence of China in the region, both France and India are in the quest to join hands and mitigate the influence of China. China, on the other hand, faced threats from the United States of America in the Strait of Malacca, a strategically important choke point for the imports and exports of China in the Asia-Pacific and from India in the IO. To mitigate its dependence on the Strait of Malacca, China launched the flagship Belt and Road Initiative BRI to reach the markets of Europe and Africa through six economic corridors.

4. French Interest in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

France has approximately 1.65 million citizens living in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly within the Indian Ocean. The majority reside on Réunion Island and Mayotte Island. In addition, France maintains several overseas territories in the Pacific region that host significant populations. France was among the early signatories of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which grants coastal states the right to explore and exploit marine resources within 200 nautical miles from their coastline—a zone defined as the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). As a beneficiary of this provision, France possesses the second-largest EEZ in the Indo-Pacific, totaling approximately 10.2 million square kilometers⁷.

Arguably, France was a late entrant in the Indian Ocean's imperial landscape. Prior to its active engagement, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and India had already begun asserting their influence in the region. France joined these major powers later; however, its growing presence in the Indian Ocean is aimed at preserving its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and fostering cordial relations with the littoral states. France's overseas territory, Réunion Island, provides it with one of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Indian Ocean, granting it strategic access and establishing its status as a resident power in the region. Similarly, Mayotte Island—another French territory in the Indian Ocean—plays a pivotal role in safeguarding France's national interests in the region. A relevant theory posits that each state, in pursuit of securing its maritime interests, seeks to establish and expand its presence in strategically significant waters such as the Indian Ocean⁸.

⁷ Claudet, J., Loiseau, C., & Pebayle, A. (2021). Critical gaps in the protection of the second largest exclusive economic zone in the world. *Marine Policy*, 124, 104379

⁸ Gupta, S. (2009). INDO-FRENCH RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD: TRANSFORMATION FROM COMMERCIAL TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 1179-1199.

As far as the benefits of large EEZs are concerned, the following are some advantages of the EEZ: marine protection areas, fishing, building oil and gas platforms, stations, etc. France has having territorial presence as well as a military presence in the Indian Ocean states of Djibouti. Djibouti hosts the French soldiers in Djibouti City, the capital of Djibouti. It is situated in the eastern part of the city and is officially known as the "French Armed Forces in Djibouti" (Forces armées françaises à Djibouti or FAFD).

5. French and Indian growing convergence in the IOR

The ongoing high-level discourse between New Delhi and Paris converges distinctly upon pivotal elements: the exchange of extensive maritime intelligence, formulation of expansive naval agreements, mutual utilization of military facilities, joint execution of naval operations, and the reinforcement of trilateral and multilateral collaborations alongside allied nations⁹. Undoubtedly, the realization of these facets necessitates an elevated plane of mutual political confidence and a deliberate departure from exclusive assertions of regional superiority.

France does not share a continent and does not have a historical linkage. Yet both parties are key allies in the region and the relations of both countries are at pinnacle. Both countries in the recent past celebrated the 25 years of its diplomatic anniversary. They are committed to taking this relationship to the next level¹⁰. Prior to this strategic partnership which took center stage after 1998 France and India only contributed to the transfer of arms and technology and engaged with each other on an international platform. France became the only European country whose policy was repugnant to the policy of other Western countries in terms of imposing the sanction after the nuclear test of India in 1998. Additionally, France played a vital role as a bridge between India and the Western countries after the nuclear test in 1998. Resultantly, France became the strategic partner of India in the region and both countries pledged to work on a strategic level¹¹.

Most considerably, France and India signed the Logistic Exchange of Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA) in 2017 enabling India to get access to the French port of Djibouti and other military and civilian ports of France in the region. In return, as per this agreement, France could take strategic advantage of various ports of India in IOR both for civilian and military purposes. There are several strong reasons why the relationship with France would further improve. Primarily, India's institutional objections appear to be less intense compared to France, a medium power without considerable political baggage like the United States. Second, France has demonstrated a sincere desire to strengthen regional security relationships with various Asian countries. Paris attempted to engage China in the African security concerns discussions combined with the increased security talks with Japan, vivid France's aggressive approach. Prominently, against such a backdrop of destabilizing geopolitical landscape, New Delhi, and Paris's mutual

⁹ Athreya, R. (2021). India's Relations with France and UK in the Indo-Pacific. *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, 2, 31-50.

¹⁰ Mohan, C. R., & Baruah, D. M. (2018). Deepening the India-France maritime partnership. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Retrieved March, 31, 2023.

¹¹ Mansi, K. (2023). India-France Strategic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean: Towards a Broader Indo-Pacific Convergence.

determination to enhance their security alliance and strengthen their positions inside the circles of IO seems thoughtful¹².

Since the Asia-Pacific region emerged as the source of geopolitical disparities and tensions, both India and France, the two major powers, recognize the need for increased bilateral cooperation¹³. Currently, due to an uncertain strategic landscape, highlighted by a marked power reconfiguration among global powers and leaders, the demands among global leaders to cooperate to protect their long-term interest are high in the region¹⁴.

Indo-France strategic cooperation on maritime matters has increased after Emmanuel Macron became leader of France's affairs. This increased attention was bolstered by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Paris to meet with President Macron in the summer of 2017. This triggered a series of high-level meetings between the two countries, with India's military chiefs traveling to Paris and French officials visiting New Delhi. Maritime security was a heated topic during the sessions.

Both France and India started negotiations to capitalize on the ports of each other in the Indian Ocean both for military and civilian purposes in 2016; this was materialized in 2017 when both countries agreed to sign the Logistics Exchange of Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in which India got the access of the Reunion Island and Mayotte island of France in the western Indian Ocean. Following the successful LEMOA deal with the United States, India, and France can consider similar agreements for their navies. This might be a significant step forward in their burgeoning strategic relationship, potentially outperforming the success of the LEMOA agreement. Such an arrangement would allow French and Indian warships to use each other's ports and facilities in the Indian Ocean, increasing their reach and operational flexibility. Moreover, France and India are consistently focusing on the energy sector. With the prime help of France, India has built nuclear power plants. The world's largest nuclear power project with a total capacity of 9.6GW has been established in Jaipur.

6. Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan since its inception perceived India as a perpetual adversary. India's increasing military expenditure and forging alliances and the 26 Rafale deal ostensibly are causing challenges for Islamabad. 26 Marine Rafale will further create a security dilemma for Islamabad. France, a closed ally of India defied arms restrictions while the US imposed sanctions on New Delhi after its 1998 nuclear tests. There have been overlapping similarities in the interests of both parties in the Indian Ocean. Modernization of aircraft and nuclear submarines would certainly pose a grave threat to Pakistan and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) a flagship project of China's led Belt and Road (BRI) considered to be the lifeline of the country's economy which is dependent on IO.

¹² Khurana, G. S. (2004). Maritime security in the Indian Ocean: Convergence plus cooperation equals resonance. *Strategic Analysis*, 28(3), 411-426.

¹³ Barma, M., & Sinha, S. (2023). France–India Security Partnership: An Assessment of Dynamic Evolution. *Strategic Analysis*, 47(3), 253-266.

¹⁴ Dr. Zafar Khan, personal communication, February 12, 2024

The new development in the recent G20 summit held in India and the initiation of the India-Middle East and Europe Corridor (IMEC) will further bring India closer to Europe as far as the security of the IMEC is concerned¹⁵. As economy and security are intertwined, the growing convergence between India and Europe in the Indian Ocean will further intensify Pakistan's woes¹⁶.

The ocean is a lifeline for both India and China in the context of energy security and economy. Indian humanization in the 1962 war with China and skirmishes with Pakistan in 1965 impelled New Delhi to focus more on territorial issues resulting in overlooking maritime security. Meanwhile, China modernized its naval power. Inking the 26 Marine Rafale deal with France and being a strategic ally of the US, India tries to get maximum dividends from France and the US enabling it to become an influential player in IO to counter China¹⁷. India has also been participating in Malabar naval exercises along with the Quad members in the Indian Ocean resulting in causing insecurity for China that invariably poses a threat to Pakistan as well. China's presence in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Iran is triggering consternation for India. The above-mentioned developments will disturb the balance of power in the Indian Ocean. The ideational war like democracy vs autocracy will get augmented soon. Indian allies under the IMEC are extremely likely to prioritize naval security in the Indian Ocean. As a result, China along with its allies will strengthen its naval power. As a result, there would be more militarization in the IO. To bear in mind that the IO has already been the most militarized ocean in the world.

Indo-French partnership in the strategic realm will have an impact on Pakistan because France is an important economic player in the world. Apart from its economic power, it is an important military actor. The more significant dimension of this partnership is that France bears significant influence in European affairs¹⁸. India, thus, would reap the benefits of a strategic partnership with Paris. France, an economic power, can considerably contribute to India's economic development through investment. It has also been contributing to India's military buildup and its defense sector. One of the examples of this has been the induction of Rafale aircraft into the Indian Air Force as well as the strengthening Indian Navy. French technology will remain crucial to India's defense and military buildup in the long time to come¹⁹. Hence, the important thing for Pakistan to consider is that close ties in the defense and security sector will pave the way for France and India to take common grounds in the diplomatic and political realms as well.

Pakistan's response to the evolving strategic dynamics in the Indian Ocean has been weak. The reality is that due to Pakistan's economic downturn, Islamabad has very

¹⁵ Hussain, M., & Ali Naqvi, S. I. (2024). Indo-Pakistan rivalry and integrated ring balancing: prospects and challenges to regional stability in South Asia. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 1-18.

¹⁶ Dr. Dost Barrech, personal communication, December 20, 2023

¹⁷ Esteban, M., & Armanini, U. (2021). *European Indo-Pacific Strategies: Convergent Thinking and Shared Limitations*.

¹⁸ Lannon, E. (2018). The European Union and the Indian Ocean Islands: identifying opportunities for developing a more ambitious and comprehensive strategy. In *Indian Ocean Islands* (pp. 105-127). Routledge.

¹⁹ Dr. Barrech, personal communication, December 20, 2023

few options to hedge on. One of the options for Pakistan can be to move closer to China in strategic and defense cooperation. However, this is not going to be easy for Pakistan because any strategic partnership with China will ultimately be repugnant to the Pak-US ties which Pakistan certainly cannot afford²⁰. India France's strategic partnership in the Indian Ocean enabled India to get defense support from France. Consequently, this can widen the scope of miscalculation between the hostile countries of Pakistan and India.

7. **Geostrategic threats to Pakistan**

Given the current state of ties between Pakistan and India, South Asia's aura is unstable enough to prevent China from quickly gaining more influence in the area. India is permitted to use French military ports in Djibouti and Mayotte and the Reunion Islands in the West of the Indian Ocean under the terms of the LEMOA. Pakistan would thus face a security conundrum. Theoretically, Pakistan would be in a vulnerable position and might be attacked from multiple directions if a war broke out²¹. The security of Pakistan is vulnerable in that it cannot protect itself from two or more fronts of war scenarios. Similarly, the enhancement in the capacity of the Indian Air Force can result in spying on the strategic assets of Pakistan. Gwadar, a center of gravity of CPEC is on the forefront to become the victim of this spying from India.

8. **Geopolitical implication for Pakistan**

New Delhi's expanding control in Pakistan's courtyard, specifically in the Indian Ocean in general, has serious geopolitical ramifications for Islamabad. For starters, New Delhi is looking for permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India is constantly working with smaller countries to enhance its case for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. India is extending loans and lines of credit to littoral states, particularly in Africa to gain assistance from the UN and other international bodies²².

Many countries, including France, the United States, Russia, Brazil, Argentina, and Portugal, began pressing for India to be granted a permanent seat on the UNSC. To be clear, by gaining a permanent place on the UN Security Council, India will make every effort to stand against Pakistan under the fallacious pretext of so-called terror financing. In the recent past, India attempted to utilize the UN Security Council forum to blacklist Pakistani citizens. The most recent instance of this type was reported in which India attempted, with the assistance of the US to censor the authorities of Jamaat-ud-awa, which India accuses of carrying out the 2008 Mumbai attacks and other attacks²³.

²⁰ Dr. Masood Khattak, personal communication, November 12, 2023

²¹ Shahzad, A. (2019). India's Maritime Strategy and its Implications for Pakistan. *Stratagem*, 2(1).

²² Das, C. (2019). India's Maritime Diplomacy in South West Indian Ocean. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 12(2), 42-59.

²³ Dr. Dost Barrech, personal communication, December 20, 2023

9. Geo-economic threats to Pakistan

The increasing Indian influence in the Indian Ocean littoral states also poses a threat to the economic security of Pakistan. India is affecting the governments of the respective countries through checkbook diplomacy. Consequently, the government will be influenced by India and will not strive to create policies that are detrimental to Pakistan's interests, i.e. anti-Pakistan strategies²⁴.

9.1 Paris Club and French influence

Major creditor nations that support developing nations financially are known as the Paris Club. Founded in 1965 it functions as an unofficial organization. The Paris Club was established primarily to negotiate and reschedule debtor countries' statutory repayment obligations. Generally speaking, loans made by governments as opposed to private creditors are considered official debt. A country may apply to the Paris Club for a debt restructuring or rescheduling if it is having financial difficulties and cannot pay its debts on time. After that, the Paris Club collaborates with the debtor nation to negotiate new terms, such as lowering the total amount owing or extending the payback period. The goal of this procedure is to help stabilize the debtor nation's economic circumstances and offer relief.

The Paris Club works based on member nations taking coordinated action to cooperatively handle sovereign debt challenges. Both developed and developing nations are represented in the club as creditors. Periodically, talks and meetings are conducted to talk about and resolve the debt difficulties of particular nations.

India and France may agree when it comes to debates in international forums such as the Paris Club if they have similar foreign policy objectives or economic interests²⁵. Their shared goals or concerns may influence how they tackle problems pertaining to financial support for nations like Pakistan²⁶.

India and France's bilateral relations could offer a forum for diplomatic communication and cooperation²⁷. As a member of the Paris Club, India may communicate with France to express its views or reservations about any plans for debt restructuring or financial aid pertaining to Pakistan.

²⁴ Farooq, I., & Qazi, M. S. (2023). Pakistan's Strategic Imperatives and Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean. *Journal of Nautical Eye and Strategic Studies*, 3(2), 44-58.

²⁵ Boquérat, G. (2022). France and South Asia. In *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia* (pp. 383-394). Routledge.

²⁶ Dr. Masood Khattak Personal communication November 12, 2023

²⁷ Malhotra, S., & Fournol, T. (2023). India-France trilaterals in the Indo-Pacific: imperatives, interests, initiatives. Observer Research Foundation, ORF.

10. Conclusion

The strategically pivotal IOR is becoming a new battlefield not only for regional powers like India and China but also for European nations like France and the United Kingdom. France is preoccupied with IO because it has two overseas territories in the West of the Indian Ocean i.e Reunion Island and Mayotte Island. Both these islands enabled France to become the resident power of the Indian Ocean and have one of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Moreover, France to secure its Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) and French interests in the region joined India to counter the rising threats from China. Both France and India collaborated on many fronts ranging from maritime time security to the Space sector. The closed partnership will have, severe geo-strategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic implications for Pakistan. France under Project 75 provided six diesel submarines, and signed agreements to provide 36 Rafael for Air Force and 26 Navy variants for the Indian Navy which paved the way for strategic instability in the region. Moreover, both parties will further collaborate in the future for nuclear submarines under "Project 75i".

To mitigate the emerging challenges from the close partnership between India and France, Pakistan can build its indigenous sea-based technology for the preservation of its assets and have a check on the activities of India and France in the region. Moreover, investing in autonomous and unmanned underwater vehicles and advancing Artificial Intelligence AI-based electronic warfare systems will be quite rational for Pakistan to acquire and safeguard its vested interest in the IOR.

In short, Pakistan and China can launch a joint effort in the IOR and intensify their activities in the region in order to counter the rising influence of India in the region. China has a military base in Djibouti and Pakistan can capitalize the presence of China in different region of Indian Ocean to mitigate the threats posing by India and its allies.