

Indo-French Cooperation and Engagement in Holistic Maritime Security: Possibilities and Implications in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

The diffusion of the Indo-Pacific concept in India's strategic vocabulary has accompanied the emergence of a broader strategic reference frame, in which the impacts of climate change on coastal areas and maritime-related environmental issues figure among the lowest common denominators of cooperation at the regional scale. In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), unregulated fishing, natural disasters relief or marine pollution indeed became major security concerns for littoral States as well as it gave a new role for the armies in mitigating increasing environmental risks. In fact, we are seeing an expansion in India-France maritime security cooperation, with particular focus on the Indian Ocean. With its expanding economic, marine military, and strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific region, India is eager to develop connections with countries throughout the area. France is emphasising its identity as an Indo-Pacific nation and showing interest in bolstering its partnership with India. The Indian Ocean has emerged as a hot topic in recent Indo-French bilateral talks, as both nations seek to broaden their long-standing strategic partnership to the maritime domain. In February 2022, they inked a roadmap to boost their bilateral exchanges on the blue economy and forge a common vision of ocean governance on the basis of the rule of law, and cooperation on sustainable and resilient coastal and waterways infrastructure (MEA, Feb 2022).¹ In this regard, both agreed to explore the potential for collaboration in marine science research for a better understanding of the oceans, including the Indian Ocean. One such partnership is the *'The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative'* (IPOI), wherein France and India have taken the responsibility of being the 'lead' for the Marine Resources Pillar, which is one of seven identified pillars (MEA, Mar 2022).²

In such a context, this paper aims to explore India's cooperation opportunities in the field of environmental security in the IOR in the context of Indo-French relations. As a preferred net security provider in the region, India has made of France one of the cornerstones of its SAGAR policy and a first-choice partner on maritime issues, as testified recently by the India-France Roadmap on Blue Economy and Ocean Governance. Based on several years of research on Indo-French relations and environmental security in the Indo-Pacific, the paper will first compare the

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securitization process of maritime-related environmental issues within the regional security policies of both countries and the adaptation of their navies to emerging environmental risks in the Indian Ocean. Then, it will analyse to what extent this process contributes to reshape military-to-military cooperation between the two navies/coast guard in emerging areas such as disaster relief operations, protection of maritime ecosystems or cyclone early warning. Then, it will consider the multilateral implications of this cooperation and its potential contribution to the security architecture of the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Blue Economy, IOR, IPOI, Holistic Maritime Security, Marine Resources

Introduction

France established diplomatic relations with India as early as the country became independent in 1947. Over the succeeding 75 years of diplomatic relations, India and France have seen a convergence of views on a range of international issues. In 1998, the two countries entered a strategic partnership in diverse fields ranging from defence and security, space, civil nuclear, economic, cultural, and educational linkages, to people-to-people contacts. India considers this strategic partnership to be one of its most fruitful and deliverable partnerships, to the point of being qualified as ‘original’ by Mr Rakesh Sood, former Indian Ambassador to France (Sood, Feb 01, 2016).³ Again, the strategic convergence of their maritime interests has resulted in a robust bilateral relationship in the Indo-Pacific. Together, they are engaged in new areas of cooperation in the region, including counter terrorism, climate change, renewable energy and sustainable growth and maritime security (MEA, Mar 2022).⁴ The current year 2022 is ‘special’ for Indo-French relations as it marks the long-standing friendship and strategic partnership characterising the links between the two countries.

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basis of the rule of law, and cooperation on *sustainable and resilient coastal and waterways infrastructure* (MEA, Feb 20, 2022).⁶ In this regard, both agreed to explore the potential for collaboration in marine science research for a better understanding of the oceans, including the Indian Ocean. One such partnership is ‘The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative’ (IPOI), wherein France and India have taken the responsibility of being the ‘lead’ for the Marine Resources Pillar, which is one of seven identified pillars (MEA, Aug 2022).⁷

France is the only European country that has a significant number of citizens — one million or so — living outside its European borders. It has a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to protect, the second largest maritime territory in the world, and has significant strategic assets employed in the Indian Ocean Region. Although France is a member-state of the EU, it often has different drivers, different priorities, and different mechanisms-of-choice from other member states. France is a strong supporter of India and, since both countries concur on the geographical boundary of the Indian Ocean segment of the Indo-Pacific, it is that much easier for them to reach a common understanding on maritime-security related matters. Moreover, Paris and New Delhi have several geoeconomic interests and goals in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that can be achieved through cooperative and collaborative endeavours. All these factors propel India to consider France a natural European partner in the Indo-Pacific (Babu Buraga & Chauhan, Mar 26, 2022).⁸

*“India considers Indo-Pacific as a region that extends from the Eastern shores of Africa to the Western shores of America (MEA, Aug 2021).”*⁹ The US has an active presence in the Pacific Ocean, but France is the only member of the EU that has physical territories, namely, in the Indian Ocean, La Réunion, Mayotte, but also the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (composed with Crozet Islands, Kerguelen Islands, Saint Paul and Amsterdam Islands and the Scattered Islands).. Thus, it is in France interest to keep the Indo-Pacific region under *a rules-based order*, which entails freedom of navigation and overflight. India and France also conduct joint patrols in the Indian Ocean from La Réunion, to ensure that the Indo-Pacific region remains free and open. During her visit to India, Florence Parly, then Minister for Armed Forces, emphasised that

India and France promote multilateralism and a rules-based international order, and it is important to ensure the Indo-Pacific region must be free from coercion by any player (MEA, Dec 2021).¹⁰

The strategic dialogue on maritime cooperation provides avenues for service-to-service cooperation between both navies. France had conveyed to India its readiness to join the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, which was launched in 1997 with India, Australia and South Africa as the significant members; (French Ministry of Armed Forces, May 19, 2000)¹¹ Currently 23 Rim countries are members of this association (Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, n.d.).¹² France became the twenty-third full member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association – reflecting “*the determination of France, an Indian Ocean rim country, to become more involved in the Indo-Pacific region* (French Ministry for Europe & Foreign Affairs, Dec 2020).”¹³ During his address at the Choose La Réunion 2019 summit in Paris, President Macron said that:

France’s ambitions for the Indian Ocean are based on the development of blue economy, connectivity, the fight against the effects of climate change, the protection of biodiversity, maritime security as well as the promotion of human and cultural exchanges (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, December 2020).¹⁴

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) are frameworks of regional forums, through which Indo-French maritime cooperation can be boosted.

The 2013 French White Paper on Defence and National Security proposed that the region from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean should become:

France’s priority geographic axes and ‘key zone of interest’ and called for a greater concentration of its military presence in that area in order to protect the French national interest (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2013).¹⁵

France’s possession of valuable military assets in the region (see below) and capabilities on its bases in La Réunion, Mayotte, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have formed into an interlocking *quadrilatère français* (French quadrilateral) and covers the southwest Indian Ocean and northwest Indian Ocean (Saint-Mezard, Mar 2015).¹⁶

According to the 2015 Indian Maritime Security Strategy, the Indian Navy’s primary Area of Interest (AOI) includes the western Indian Ocean, Indian territorial waters, and the Sea Lines of Communication, while its secondary AOI comprises the south-eastern Indian Ocean, South and East China Seas, and the western Pacific (MoD, Oct 2015).¹⁷ France’s armed forces too consider

the Indo-Pacific as an area spanning from Africa's eastern *façade* to French Polynesia, akin to the Indian vision of the Indo-Pacific maritime space (French Ministry of Armed Forces, May 2019).¹⁸ Sharing the same geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific makes it easy for New Delhi and Paris to come together and create a common maritime vision, which upholds the Law of the Sea in the Indian Ocean region, secures the sea lanes of communication, responds to humanitarian disasters, and promotes sustainable blue economy.

Additional military facilities in French Polynesia and New Caledonia compliment France's quadrilateral strategic nodes (Roger, Mar 2007).¹⁹ The French military capabilities are reinforced through combined military exercises with regional powers such as India, and by their sale of defence equipment worth €13,411 million to India between 2008 and 2017 (Ministry of Armed Forces, May 2019).²⁰ Besides defending its territorial and economic interests in the region, France is also ready to contribute to the stability of the region alongside its partners, primarily India (Chen, Jul 2016).²¹

Naval Synergy

Safeguarding freedom of navigation and securing the stability of Indo-Pacific remained a crucial item on the agenda when Prime Minister Modi met President Macron at an annual summit in August 2019. It was decided to jointly produce satellites for maritime surveillance in the Indian Ocean Region; to coordinate their action at the IORA and the IONS; and to undertake a joint project for reinforcing assets for combatting piracy and all kinds of maritime trafficking in the Southern Indian Ocean, along with other partner countries (Roy-Chaudhury & Estrada, 2018).²² Indian scholars welcome the Indo-French cooperation in the Indian Ocean region and believe that interoperable navies using each other's naval facilities will lead to the establishment of a more effective security architecture in the Indo-Pacific (Pant, Mar 2018).²³ This development is especially favourable to India in promoting its strategic interest in the western Indian Ocean region as to the French military bases at Djibouti, Abu Dhabi, and La Réunion can serve the Indian Navy as a force multiplier (Mishra, Nov 2018).²⁴

The shared concerns of India and France go beyond maritime security, ensuring respect for international law by all states, freedom of navigation and overflight, fight against organised crime and combatting climate change. One important development is the idea of Franco-Indian joint patrolling in the Indian Ocean. In December 2019, Vice Admiral Didier Malterre, Joint

Commander of the French forces, said “*we are now preparing to carry out joint patrol in southern Indian Ocean; India is planning to deploy P-8I aircraft (TNIE, Dec 10, 2019).*”²⁵

India and France concluded their second patrolling in the southwestern Indian Ocean. According to a report in *The Hindu* dated 17 May 2022:

During the five days from May 9 to 13, an Indian Navy P-8I aircraft was deployed from the French island of La Réunion to carry out “joint surveillance and patrolling operations” with the French Navy in the southwestern Indian Ocean (Peri, May 17, 2022).²⁶

Two French Floréal-class surveillance frigates, the *Floréal* and the *Nivôse*, took part in the deployment, with focus on anti-smuggling. “*In order to increase the level of interoperability, French sailors were taken onboard the P-8I (Peri, May 17, 2022).*”²⁷ France and India have conducted joint patrolling out of La Réunion Island and this type of operation demonstrates how Indo-French naval cooperation jointly act as net security providers (Lenin, Jul 08, 2022).²⁸

The combined naval exercises in the form of VARUNA have proceeded apace and moves are afoot for mutual and complete maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean region (Kumar, May 04, 2022).²⁹ The nineteenth edition of the Indo-French combined exercises conducted in April 2021, witnessed high tempo-naval operations at sea, including advanced air defence and anti-submarine exercises, intense fixed and rotary wing flying operations, tactical manoeuvres, surface and anti-air weapon firings, underway replenishment and other maritime security operations. Both navies honed and enhanced their war-fighting skills to demonstrate their ability as an integrated force to promote *peace, security, and stability* in the maritime domain (IN, Apr 27, 2021).³⁰

The annual Indo-French naval exercise was conducted in April 2022, off Goa in the Arabian Sea. The “*joint naval exercises in the form of VARUNA have been a key driver for operational level interactions between the two navies and has underscored the shared commitment of both nations to security, safety and freedom of the global maritime commons (Shukla, Apr 03, 2022).*”³¹ The French Navy projects power into the Indian Ocean region with nuclear-powered submarines and a relatively state-of-the-art aircraft carrier battle group built around its flagship: *Charles de Gaulle*. This 42,500-tonne nuclear-powered aircraft carrier carries a potent air complement that includes the Rafale-Marine aircraft. Given the Indian Navy’s eagerness to buy 57 twin-engine, deck-borne fighters, Paris is tracking that tender closely. “All exercises planned during VARUNA 2022 aim to enhance common understanding of the two navies on the conduct of joint maritime

security operations (Shukla, Apr 03, 2022).”³² Beyond Ex VARUNA, India and France are committed to utilising every opportunity of their naval ships calling at each other’s ports for holding passage exercises (PASSEX).

Looking Ahead: Environmental Maritime Security as an Emerging Theme for Cooperation

Maritime Cooperation between France and India has reached a new level of ‘trust’ and is expected to grow through exercises, exchanges, and joint endeavours. As *resident powers* of the Indo-Pacific, both understand the challenges, opportunities, and stakes in the region. The 2018 French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific provides ample space and opportunity for France to work with like-minded nations of the Indo-Pacific in general, and India in particular. Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar, writer and observer of Maritime Affairs points out:

Unlike the documents issued by other European nations such as Germany and the Netherlands, France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy is more encompassing, specific and provides clarity of intent. This stems from the fact that France as an Indo-Pacific nation has better understanding of several sub-regions that comprise the Indo-Pacific, especially the IOR, which amplifies the aspects of presence and permanency (Parmar, May 20, 2022).³³

The development of France’s strategic relations with India can be advantageous to both countries. India would rather have France as a long-term *ally* given the transactional dynamics with the US and the colonial legacies with the UK. Increased engagement in the Indian Ocean and improved ties with India will open the door for France to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which will provide it access to Southeast Asian economies. As the only European state to do so, this would aid France in diversifying its contacts and securing a *unique* position in the Indo-Pacific. It would increase France's standing inside ASEAN, bolstering the Indo-Pacific.

India stands to benefit in several ways by deepening ties with France, a partner who shares its ideals of multilateralism and pluralism. Furthermore, India gains an ally that agrees with its interpretation of what constitutes the Indian Ocean Region, which is from Gulf of Aden in the West to Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand in the East – the French shares this geographical context. A relationship with France is also unburdened of the domestic political pressures that come into play with other bilateral relationships, and French support for India has had a *bipartisan* consensus since the establishment of the strategic partnership.

If France were to offer its Barracuda nuclear attack submarine for the Indian Navy's Project 75 Alpha, it would further deepen their maritime cooperation. This signalling comes in the background of Australia abruptly cancelling the 90-billion-dollar diesel-powered submarine deal with France; instead, choosing to pursue a nuclear-powered submarine option under the AUKUS pact. Even as this episode was a major setback for France, several analysts, including this author believe that it turned out to be favourable for India's Defence's industry.

Both nations know that the regions' challenges go beyond maritime security, and they are multifaceted. India and France have the ability to offer a comprehensive, sustainable, alternative model to the countries of the region. From connectivity to environment, healthcare and sustainable financing, the focus of their maritime cooperation is now shifting to developing joint projects in third countries. This is also the driving force behind the EU's Strategy for the Indo-Pacific, of which France is a staunch supporter. This is advantageous because it brings in additional resources of the EU institutions and of 27 Member States to build and fund concrete actions.

It is hoped that this Strategic convergence will *reinforce* their *dosti/relation amicale* (friendship). "Within the context of India's traditional discomfort and discomfiture with 'alliance' and being an 'ally,' the usage of the phrase 'Indo-French alliance' demonstrates India's resolve to develop and sustain an 'all-weather partnership' with France (Buraga, 2020).³⁴ Likewise, during his speech at UNESCO in Paris in August 2019, Prime Minister Modi proclaimed:

...today in the 21st century, we talk of INFRA. I would like to say that for me it is IN+FRA, which means the alliance between India and France... (PMO, Aug 2019).³⁵

In particular, environmental security in the maritime domain could emerge as a one of the key areas for cooperation between the two countries for a common contribution to regional stability.

Assessing Maritime Environmental Security Risks in the Indian Ocean Region

The Indo-Pacific is one of the world's most exposed regions to environmental risks and particularly to natural disasters, as reminded by the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean and Cyclone Nargis in 2008 in Myanmar - the deadliest of the decade with more than 138,000 people killed or missing and 8 million affected. Cyclone Idai, which hit the eastern side of the Indian Ocean in March 2019, is the seventh major cyclone to hit the region, according to the French weather agency. In 2008, Asia remained the most affected continent by natural

disasters, accounting for 40% of all natural disasters worldwide and more than 80% of victims (Caballero & Cook, 2013, p 85).³⁶

While the number of such natural disasters “has more than doubled compared to the 1980-1989 decade” (Alex, Baillat & Gemenne, 2017), rising sea levels are also a major risk, particularly for Indian Ocean islands such as the Maldives (Cordner, 2010, p 77).³⁷ Other experts indicate that

For a 40 cm rise by 2080 (...) the number of people affected annually by flooding would be 93 million (13 million without sea level rise). In this scenario, the heaviest burden would be borne by the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean (French Senate, Oct 2015).³⁸

The increase in ocean temperature, which is faster in the Indian Ocean than anywhere else (Cordner, 2010, p 77),³⁹ and ocean acidification linked to climate change can cause major degradation of the marine environment. In the Indo-Pacific, mangroves and coral reefs

Not only ensure the survival of coastal populations, but also allow the reproduction and growth of many species, especially fish, ensure water purification and CO2 absorption, and constitute a significant protection against tsunamis (De Tréglodé & Fau, 2018).

However, more than half of these reefs are already considered to be highly or very highly threatened (WRI, 2011).⁴⁰ It is estimated that the area of mangrove swamps has been reduced by 70% over the last 50 years, and that coral reefs have been reduced by 80% since the 1950s (De Treglode & Fau, 2018, p 113).⁴¹ In addition, the bleaching of corals due to the consequences of climate change would make them more susceptible to disease, with an increased risk of colonisation by toxic microscopic algae that could be ingested by fish, which are in turn consumed by populations.

The vulnerability of the Indo-Pacific region to environmental hazards is greatly enhanced by the coastalisation of the population and activities, as well as by the relative dependence of these populations on marine resources. While “*In Asia, more than 40% of the population (about 2 billion people) live within 60 km of the coast*” (French Senate, Oct 2015),⁴² the impacts of the disappearance of coral reefs on fisheries resources could “*reduce the region's food supply by 80% and affect between 100 and 150 million people*” (Cordner, 2010).

At the same time, many countries bordering the Indian Ocean Region have little capacity to reduce these risks (Cordner, 2010, p 71).⁴³ A state's ability to respond to natural disasters often

depends on its response system, including the existence of an evacuation plan, organisation to relocate disaster victims, assistance channels, infrastructure protection etc (French Senate, Oct 2015).⁴⁴ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) frequently publishes a report on the obstacles to development in Southeast Asia and the structural reforms needed. For 2014, the organisation mentions, among other things, strengthening natural disaster management and infrastructure protection as a medium-term policy challenge in Indonesia (OECD, 2014).⁴⁵

Given the Indo-Pacific's high vulnerability to climate change, the relatively low resilience of states, and the security implications of climate hazards and environmental degradation, the role of armies should become increasingly important in helping to address these challenges. This is mainly because militaries generally have the resources and skills to respond quickly and effectively to natural disasters (Laksmana, 2011, p 286).⁴⁶ Some authors even argue that the military is the most effective instrument of state power for transnational disaster management (Kumar Gautam, 2010, p 150).⁴⁷

However, Evan Laksmana points out the risk of securitising everything about climate change. It is not, he says, a uniform phenomenon and it does not affect every region and country equally, with some being more vulnerable than others (Laksmana, 2011, p 276).⁴⁸ As we have seen, the Indian Ocean Region is certainly more exposed to the consequences of climate change than other regions in the world, and the countries bordering it are relatively ill-equipped to deal with these risks. These challenges may require, according to Lee Corder, a response based on regional cooperation and collective action (Corder, 2010, p 73).⁴⁹

France and Maritime Environmental Security in the Indian Ocean

Environmental security is one of the pillars of the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific and a key lever of influence for the country's recognition as a responsible strategic player in the region. France's ambition to exercise regional leadership on these issues also has the double objective of raising awareness and alerting the States bordering the two oceans to the growing environmental risks in the maritime domain, but also of federating the actors in the region around more consensual cooperation themes. The environment is therefore seen as a federating and confidence-building factor for strengthening regional security cooperation.

French Navy's action in maritime environmental security takes different forms in the Indian Ocean Region, from assistance following natural disasters, such as the deployment of an A400M

transport aircraft to Indonesia during a typhoon in 2018, to maritime domain awareness and the fight against illegal unreported and unregulated fishing. For example, on 17 November 2018, an Overseas Support and Assistance Ship (OSAV) carried out an anti-pollution exercise to the west of Reunion Island, in the bay of Saint-Paul. With regard to illegal fishing and the fight against the plundering of living resources and the preservation of marine protected areas, the French Navy observed no less than 32 offences in the Scattered Islands of the Indian Ocean (*îles Éparses*) in 2014.⁵⁰ In 2016, the surveillance frigate *Floréal*:

Inspected a fishing vessel sailing in the French waters of Juan de Nova, which led to the discovery of one and a half tonnes of fish (young sharks, groupers, bonito and other barracudas) as well as three hundred litres of sea cucumbers in brine (protected sea cucumbers). (French National Assembly, June 2016, p 12)⁵¹

Witnessing the importance of fisheries surveillance missions among the activities of the French Navy, the surveillance frigate *Floréal* was thus deployed at the end of 2018 off the Crozet archipelago in the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (TAAF), an area classified as a nature reserve.

A Broader Political Commitment in favour of Maritime Environment Security

By declaring in April 2007 that “*climate change is one of the main threats to the future of humanity and endangers its environmental security*” (Sabliere, Apr 17, 2007),⁵² France was among the first nations to make climate change a security issue. Nearly ten years later, the French Ministry of the Armed Forces stated that France intends to “*be a pioneer player in environmental security and contribute to human security*” (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2018, p 11).⁵³ The leadership displayed by the Ministry of the Armed Forces in this field is in line with the rise of French diplomatic activism in this area, which culminated in 2015 with the organisation of COP21. The event was also the occasion for the Ministry to organise the first international conference on the links between climate and defence, bringing together for the first-time high-level defence authorities on the subject at international level. In the IOR, the role of the French Navy in addressing the maritime challenges of environmental security is above all in the respect and implementation of commitments made by France in this field at the political level. These include, in particular, the Nagoya Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity, covering the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), but also the six regional seas conventions to which France is a contracting party (French National Assembly, Feb 2012, p 19).⁵⁴

French Navy and Maritime Environmental Security in the IOR

The French Ministry of the Armed Forces can count on the resources of the French Navy, which is permanently present in the region and has expertise in environmental issues. This expertise is particularly based on the French model of 'State Action at Sea' (*Action de l'État en mer*) and the concept of 'maritime safeguarding' (*sauvegarde maritime*).

The presence of the French Navy in the Indo-Pacific follows a rigorous division. In the Indian Ocean, it is coordinated by "ALINDIEN", the Admiral Commander of the Indian Ocean Maritime Zone, the maritime forces of the Indian Ocean, and ensuring the superior command of the French Forces in the United Arab Emirates (COMFOR FFEAU), including the forces of the Army and the Air Force. In the Indian Ocean, a distinction is made between the French Forces in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU) and the French Forces in Djibouti (FFDJ) in one hand, and in the second the Armed Forces of the Southern Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI) whose units are stationed in Reunion and Mayotte.

All the resources of the French Navy in the Indo-Pacific region are concentrated in 6 naval bases located in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, La Reunion, Mayotte, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates. In 2019, the Navy had 4 surveillance frigates (Floréal, Nivôse, Prairial and Vendémiaire), 3 overseas support and assistance ships (BSAOM), 6 patrol boats (all types), 5 detachments of marine fusiliers, a detachment of maritime commandos, without forgetting the aeromarine means (Dauphin N3+, Alouette III and Panther helicopters, or Falcon 200 aircraft). In 2022, for the only Indian Ocean Region and all branches included, the Ministry of the Armed Forces made an inventory of approximately 4 100 military personnel deployed in the region, 10 fighter planes and 10 helicopters, 5 naval units and 3 transport or surveillance aircrafts.

In a parliamentary report, the French National Assembly underlined the environmental scope of the French Navy's missions:

As the State is responsible for protecting the environment at sea, the Navy implements a system for suppressing deliberate pollution in the areas under its jurisdiction (French National Assembly, 2012, p 19).⁵⁵

The Navy also participates in the management and protection of protected maritime areas. In the ultra-marine territories, including the Indian Ocean, the Navy is also very much involved in the

performance of fisheries control and policing missions. As a result, the Navy is a major lever for the environmental component of the national strategy for the sea and oceans.

This expertise of the French Navy in environmental risk management is based on a special maritime action organisational model that naturally integrates both military and civilian aspects. Since 1978, France has indeed a specific organisation for its action at sea. Its specificity is due to a high degree of coordination between the administrations operating at sea, namely the Navy, customs, maritime affairs, police, gendarmerie and civil security, all of which are placed under a single authority. Called 'State Action at Sea' (*Action de l'État en mer*) this model is based on the different means of intervention of the various actors that make it up and is divided into 45 missions, 44 of which fall within the competence of the Navy (French Senate, 2012, p 156).⁵⁶ By integrating the Navy with maritime policing functions, the French model described above gives the Navy a natural role as a contributor to environmental issues in French maritime zones.

This duality of the French Navy's activities is also embodied in the concept of 'maritime safeguarding' (*sauvegarde maritime*) that the Navy has been developing since the early 2000s. This concept determines the framework of the Navy's defence missions in the strategic function of "protection" and its involvement in the State's Action at Sea. In other words, it summarises the defence and public service missions that the Navy carries out in collaboration with the other administrations concerned. The concept of maritime safeguarding thus comprises four main areas of action and covers the fight against pollution at sea, assistance following natural disasters, and marine policing activities - including against illegal fishing - in French territorial waters and beyond. All these 'maritime safeguarding' missions represent 28% of the French Navy's activities (French National Assembly, 2012, p 18).⁵⁷ In 2009, the creation of a 'coastguard function' was also an opportunity to review the roadmap and priorities of the State's Action at Sea. An Inter-ministerial Committee on the Sea, which took place in June 2011, simplified the 45 missions that initially made up this roadmap, setting five main priorities for the State's Action at Sea: saving human life and assisting ships in difficulty, combating illegal trafficking by sea, combating pollution at sea, combating the plundering of living resources, and monitoring and preserving marine protected areas.

Perspectives for New Synergies

Leaning on its permanent military presence in the Indian Ocean Region and its specific organisational model that makes its Navy a natural contributor in addressing such issues, France's

commitment in environmental maritime security could provide a new synergy between the two countries to strengthen their joint contribution to regional stability. Indeed, this ambition matches with the willingness of India to act as a “first responder” in case of natural disaster in the region and the increasing focus on HADR activities in Indian naval diplomacy.

Since 2004, India's investment in HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) missions has increased significantly (Desbonnets & Fournol, 2020). Examples include the relief operations after cyclones Nargis and Mora in 2008 and 2017, or during the drinking water shortage that affected the capital of the Maldives in December 2014.¹⁸ New Delhi was asked by the Maldivian government to deliver relief supplies to Malé. At the request of the Maldivian government, New Delhi delivered nearly 1,200 tons of fresh water to Malé in less than 12 hours. At the multilateral level, India's recognized expertise in providing assistance (Myanmar, for example, seized New Delhi's outstretched hand during Cyclone Nargis, after refusing Western aid), will undoubtedly also have served its strategy of influence in the face of an increasingly demonstrative China in the Indian Ocean, embodied since 2015 by the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) "vision" and New Delhi's positioning as a "net security provider" in the region.²⁰ In this context, it is not surprising to see the HADR component involved in a good number of maritime security cooperation initiatives of Indian origin, first and foremost the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) set up in 2008.

This convergence between India and France in addressing environmental maritime security issues at the regional scale could therefore emerge as a potential flourishing area for cooperation, through which both countries could contribute to the construction an alternative framework for security cooperation in the IOR, based on regionally shared and transnational threats that would be more likely to federate actors in the region beyond political and ideological divergences.

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