

## THE VANILLA ISLANDS — POTENTIAL FOR A ‘PLURALISTIC SECURITY COMMUNITY’

*Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Ms Anum Khan*

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The expression “Vanilla Islands” is a colloquialism that has been gaining currency since 2010 and is used to collectively describe a group of six exotic island-States (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Reunion, and Seychelles) that are strategically located in the western Indian Ocean. Basic maritime geographical statistics of these island-States are tabulated in Table 1:

State	Land Area (Sq km)	Principal Constituent Islands	Coastline (km)	EEZ (Sq km)
Comoros	1,861	Njazidja (Grande Comore), Mwali (Mohéli), Ndzuwani (Anjouan)	340	161,993
Mauritius	2,040	Mauritius, Rodrigues, Agaléga, Cargados Carajos Shoals (Saint Brandon)	177	1,274,638
Mayotte	374	Grande-Terre, Petite-Terre	185	50,000
Reunion	2,512	One Massive Island	207	309,956
Seychelles	455	115 Islands	491	1,288,643
Madagascar	587,041		5,600	1,140,000

**Table 1:** Basic Maritime Geographical Statistics

**Source:** Christian Bouchard, “The Energy Challenge in Small Island States and Territories: The Case of the South-West Indian Ocean Small Islands”, in *Energy Security in the Indian Ocean Region*, ed Dennis Rumley and Sanjay Chaturvedi (New York: Routledge, 2015), 207, Table 11.1

Of these six constituent entities of the ‘Vanilla Islands’, four (Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, and Mauritius) are independent republics, while the remaining two (Mayotte and La Reunion) are under the political control of France. Five of them are ‘Small Island Developing States’<sup>1</sup> (SIDS), with Madagascar being the sole exception — mainly as a result of its physical size rather than its economic development. Indeed, two of these island-States (Comoros and Madagascar) fall under the category of Least Developed Countries (LDC).<sup>2</sup> That said, economic strength is an important but grossly inadequate measure of strategic relevance, and Indian maritime and strategic analysts would do well to bear in mind the sobering fact that in the

<sup>1</sup> Santos-Paulino et al, *Understanding Small Islands Developing States: Fragility and External Shocks*, (New York: Routledge, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> UN list of Least Developed Countries, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), <https://unctad.org/topic/least-developed-countries/list>

UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) Rankings of 2020, India itself ranks well below all but two of the six constituents of the 'Vanilla Islands', as shown in Table 2.<sup>3</sup>

'Vanilla-Islands' Constituent State	Rank (2020)	HDI Value (2019)
La Reunion		0.843 <sup>4</sup>
Mauritius	66	0.804
Seychelles	67	0.796
Mayotte		0.781 <sup>5</sup>
<b>India</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>0.645</b>
Comoros	156	0.554
Madagascar	164	0.528

**Table 2:** Human Development Ranking referenced to India

**Source:** (1) UNDP, Human Development Index Ranking: Human Development Report 2020; (2) Institute of Management Research, Radboud University (Netherlands)

In contemporary times, although it is the 'Indo-Pacific' that dominates the wider narrative of 'maritime strategies' of key States, the Indian Ocean, which is the western half of the Indo-Pacific construct, has retained its importance, encapsulating the interests of diverse stakeholders, and remains a key focal point. This is not surprising since the maritime domain has parallel and often simultaneously extant dimensions of peace and conflict. In times of peace, the seas are viewed as an integral and central portion of the global commons and nations endeavour to create conditions that would keep International Shipping Lanes (ISLs) open for maritime-trade and free from malevolent interference. In times of conflict, however, merchandise-trade is often re-routed and the establishment and protection of 'Sea Lines of Communication' (SLOCS) becomes the predominant requirement. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) expectedly views the Indian Ocean as a lifeline of international trade and transport as "*it commands control [sic] of the major sea lanes, which carry half of the world's container ships, one third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and two thirds of the world's oil shipments*".<sup>6</sup> Obviously, chokepoints (narrow sea-passages through which shipping — naval and mercantile — must necessarily pass) become crucial elements. The Indian Ocean has five strategic chokepoints in its western segment: (1) the Strait of Hormuz, (2) the Suez Canal, (3) the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, (4) the Mozambique Channel, (5) The Cape of Good Hope [a weather-determined chokepoint], and four in its eastern segment (1) the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, (2) the Sunda-Bangka Strait, (3) the Lombok-Makassar Strait, and (4) the Strait of Ombai-Wetar.<sup>7</sup> These chokepoints and the potential advantages of control over them play a large part in making Indian Ocean a zone of contestation as well as cooperation. For the

<sup>3</sup> UNDP, Human Development Index Ranking: Human Development Report 2020, <https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking>.

<sup>4</sup> Global Data Lab, "Human Development Indices (5.0) [Sub-National Regions]", Institute of Management Research, Radboud University (Netherlands) [https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/shdi/FRA/?levels=1%2B4&interpolation=1&extrapolation=0&nearest\\_real=0&years=2019](https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/shdi/FRA/?levels=1%2B4&interpolation=1&extrapolation=0&nearest_real=0&years=2019)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> "The Indian Ocean: About IORA," Indian Ocean Rim Association, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.iora.int/en/about/about-iora>.

<sup>7</sup> Commodore Sanjay J Singh, NM et al, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi: India, 2015), 20-21.

purposes of this article, focus will be retained upon the five chokepoints of the Western Indian Ocean.

The ‘Vanilla Islands’ form an indispensable part of the Indian Ocean geography. Yet, despite the fact that varying national interests have resulted in an expansion of the Indian Ocean strategic footprint<sup>8</sup> of a number of resident and ‘non-resident’ States, major stakeholders in the IOR have, until recently, had a myopic outlook towards them. It is only in the last decade that these ‘Vanilla Islands’ have gained some degree of centrality in the geoeconomic and geostrategic calculus of the traditional major-powers operating within the Indian Ocean, namely, the US, France, and the UK, as also relatively new ones such as India, China, Japan, and the EU. Apart

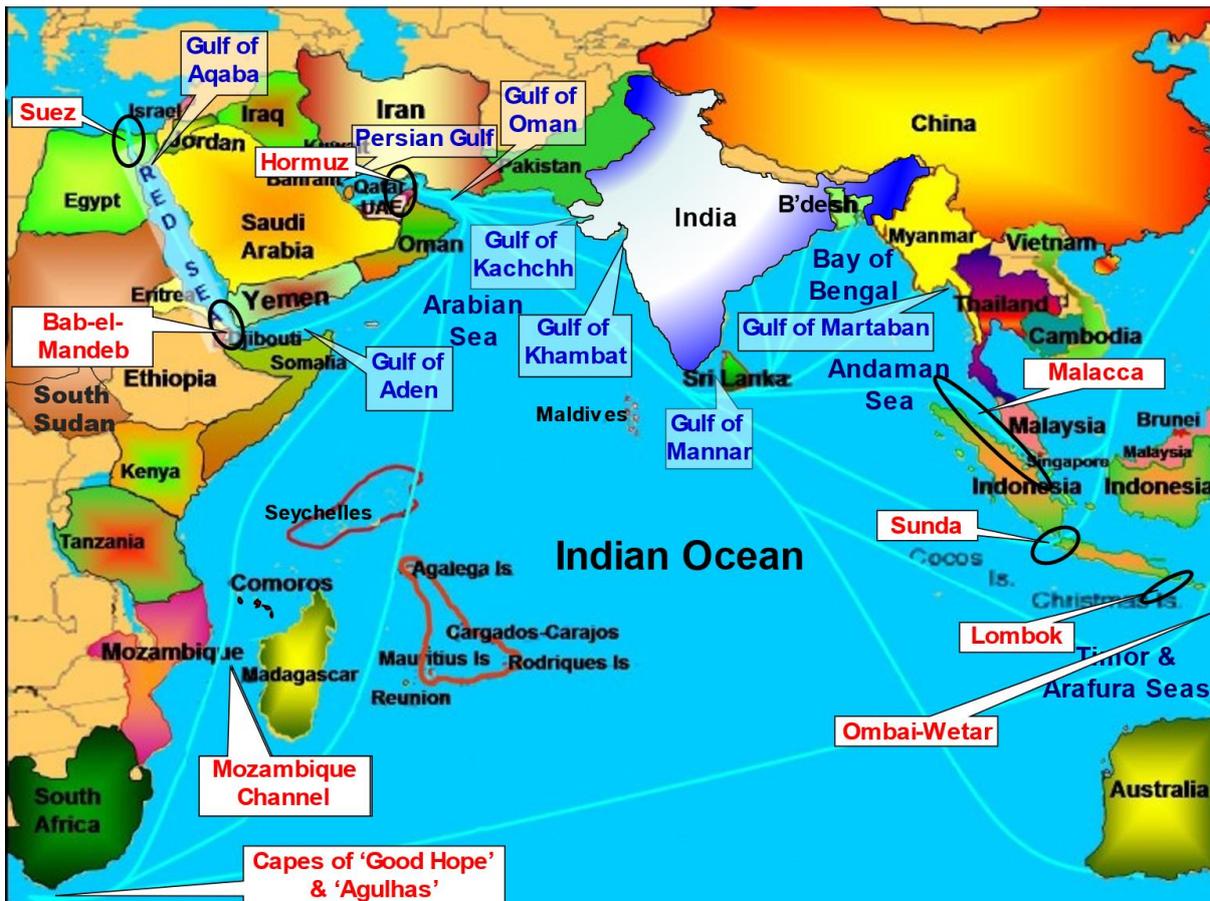


Fig 1: Chokepoints of the Indian Ocean

Source: Authors

from the obvious strategic relevance of their geographical location, the enormous economic potential of the ‘Vanilla Islands’ in terms of marine and maritime tourism, is increasingly being recognised both within the constituents themselves as well as by other stakeholders. This is driving a steadily-intensifying thrust for sustainable maritime connectivity of every sort — physical, digital, and people-to-people. It is also driving a desire for port-led development that is ecologically sustainable, environmentally-friendly, and resilient in the face of climate change. Paradoxically, of course, these very drivers also make the ‘Vanilla Islands’ more susceptible to the geostrategic moves of the major maritime powers as they jockey for positions of relative

<sup>8</sup> James R. Holmes, “Looking South: Indian Ocean” in Handbook of India’s International Relations, ed David Scott, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2011), 160.

advantage in their own competitive quest to attain their stated and unstated geoeconomic goals as also non-geoeconomic ones (prestige and influence being prime examples of the latter). Fortunately, cooperative and collaborative opportunities also arise from the presence of great powers, and could result in win-win situations relevant to holistic maritime security as well as sustainable ‘blue’ economic growth. Identifying and seizing every such opportunity is extremely important to the ‘Vanilla Islands’ because island-tourism is very sensitive to non-traditional threats ranging from maritime crime to IUU fishing and marine pollution. In fact, even those who attempt to look at the Southwest Indian Ocean through a security lens often find it essential to establish and maintain peace and stability by ensuring a state of power equilibrium, and transforming all stake-holders who are susceptible to threats into equitable actors that act in concert while handling common threats — especially non-traditional ones. Thus, the Indian definition of holistic maritime security, which is “*freedom from threats arising in-, from-, or through the sea*” is one that is particularly apt when creating a security environment that would be most conducive to the ‘blue’ economic development of the ‘Vanilla Islands’.

The fact that the ‘Vanilla Islands’ lie in the proximity of the Mozambique Channel makes this waterway in particular and the southwest Indian Ocean in general, an area of sharp focus. On the one hand, this is due to the continued relevance of the Mozambique Channel as a geopolitically viable alternative to the Suez Canal. Indeed, the vulnerability of the Suez Canal trade route manifests itself in disruptive fashion with disconcerting frequency. For example, Egypt closed the Suez Canal twice as a consequence of armed conflict — once from 31 October 1956 to March 1957 in the face of the British-French-Israeli military reaction to the nationalisation of the canal<sup>10</sup>; then again for a staggering eight years, from 05 June 1967 to 05 June 1975, with fifteen cargo ships known as “The Yellow Fleet” remaining trapped inside throughout the years of closure<sup>11</sup>. Periodic terrorist-attacks, too, have underscored the fragility of this maritime chokepoint. In 2013, a Sinai-based militant group called the Furqan Brigades attacked two vessels in the waterway with rocket-propelled grenades.<sup>12</sup> Again, in 2015, Egyptian authorities intercepted an alleged attack on the Suez Canal — this time purportedly by the Muslim Brotherhood — and arrested 13 of the Brotherhood’s members for planting bombs around the Canal.<sup>13</sup> In this very month and year (May of 2022), the canal was once again attacked by terrorists — this time from ISIS (*Daesh*). The attack was thwarted but resulted in the death of eleven Egyptian soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Navigational accidents, too, have disrupted the Suez Canal on several occasions. The most recent (and most severe) of these disruptions occurred in March of 2021, when the grounding of the 20,000-TEU container-carrier, the MV Ever Given, caused a

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<sup>9</sup> Address by Dr Manmohan Singh, erstwhile Prime Minister of India, inaugurating the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Seminar at New Delhi, 14 February, 2008,

<http://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=633>

<sup>10</sup> Suez Canal Authority: Canal History.

<https://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/English/About/SuezCanal/Pages/CanalHistory.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> James Feyrer, “The 1967-75 Suez Canal Closure: Lessons for Trade and the Trade-Income Link”, 23 December 2009, Vox<sup>EU</sup> & CEPR (Centre for Economic Policy Research) Portal, <https://voxeu.org/article/1967-75-suez-canal-closure-lessons-trade>

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Starr, “Attacks in the Suez: Security of the Canal at Risk?”, *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center, Volume 7, Issue 1, January 2014, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/attacks-in-the-suez-security-of-the-canal-at-risk/>

<sup>13</sup> The Maritime Executive, 09 July 2015, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/suez-canal-terrorist-attack-thwarted>

<sup>14</sup> Saudi Arabia Condemns ‘Terrorist Attack’ in Egypt that Killed 11 Soldiers”, Arab News, 07 May 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2077376/saudi-arabia>

six-day closure, imposing a cost-penalty upon the global economy of \$416 million per hour!<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the relevance of the Mozambique Channel as an attractive alternative (and often the only one) to the Suez Canal continues to be acknowledged to by maritime strategists and practitioners alike, particularly for “vessels that are transiting from the Cape of Good Hope to Asia, Australia and beyond”.<sup>16</sup> It is also indispensable for any power seeking to establish presence in waters off the eastern coast of Africa.

In determining the relative placement — in terms of both, importance and immediacy/urgency — of the ‘Vanilla Islands’ in their geostrategic calculations, regional as well as extra-regional States/collectives operating within the Indian Ocean (especially major ones such as the US, China, India, France, the EU, and Japan) are, of course, guided by the geostrategies by which they intend to attain their respective geoeconomic and non-economic goals. That these are not limited to maritime trade alone is obvious. Energy-related geostrategies vis-à-vis the Mozambique Channel offer a case in point. The discovery of massive offshore gas reserves off Mozambique, Tanzania, and Madagascar, have the near-term potential of enhancing the criticality of the Mozambique Channel to match that of the Persian Gulf, bringing with it the promise of economic prosperity and also the apprehension of geopolitical maritime rivalry — both of a scale hitherto unimagined. Energy-centric geoeconomic activity within the Mozambique Channel commenced in 2006 with the discovery of “supergiant resources of natural gas”<sup>17</sup> in the Rovuma Basin of the order of 180 trillion cubic feet (tcf). For Indian maritime analysts it should be sobering, by way of comparison, to note that as of 31 March 2022, India’s recoverable reserves of natural gas were estimated to be a mere 48 tcf.<sup>18</sup> With natural gas offering (at the very least) a bridging-strategy in the global movement away from fossil-fuel-based energy, this geoeconomic (and hence geopolitical) activity is now becoming frenetic. Nation-states and collective-entities such as China, the EU, France, India, Nigeria, Qatar, Russia, Thailand, etc., are all jockeying for a share in the development of the Rovuma Basin.<sup>19</sup> For instance, on 08 March of this very year (2022), the European Commission outlined its “REPowerEU” plan, as part of which the 3.4-million-metric-ton-per-year (mtpa) *Coral Sul* FLNG (Floating Liquefied Natural Gas) platform is being deployed, by a consortium led by the Italian E&P company *Eni*<sup>20</sup>, in Area-4 of the Rovuma Basin. In this connection, it is pertinent to

<sup>15</sup> Mauricio Chamberlin, Ariane Datil, and Tamika Cody, “Verify: Ever Given Ship Stuck in the Suez Canal cost the Economy \$400 Million an Hour”, *10tv.com*, 29 March 2021, <https://www.10tv.com/article/news/verify/verify-ship-stuck-in-suez-canal-cost-economy-400m-an-hour/507-205b5e13-8107-4a0f-83df-266c96230f10>

<sup>16</sup> Darshana. M Baruah, “Strengthening Delhi’s Strategic Partnerships in the Indian Ocean” (Washington: USA, 2005)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/eni-worldwide/africa/mozambique.html>

<sup>18</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, <https://mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/1606151//Chapter%201-Reserves%20and%20Potential%20for%20Generation1644825603407.pdf/f6f98d99-7a16-9ada-68c2-36c04a820ca9>

<sup>19</sup> Iain Esau, “Mozambique: All eyes on Suitors as they await News on Bid Round Qualification”, *Upstream Online Web Portal*, 04 April 2022, <https://www.upstreamonline.com/exploration/mozambique-all-eyes-on-suitors-as-they-await-news-on-bid-round-qualification/2-1-1195866>

**For an India-specific Summary, see also:** ONGC Videsh Ltd, “Joint Venture Partners Of Mozambique Rovuma Offshore Area 1 Seal More LNG Sale and Purchase Agreements”, <https://www.ongcvidesh.com/joint-venture-partners-of-mozambique-rovuma-offshore-area-1-seal-more-lng-sale-and-purchase-agreements/> [ONGC Videsh holds 16% interest in the Mozambique Rovuma Area-1 Offshore Project out of which 10% PI is held directly by ONGC Videsh and another 6% interest is held through its 60% shareholding in ‘Beas Rovuma Energy Mozambique Limited’ (“BREML”) while the remaining 40% shares in BREML are held by Oil India Limited (“OIL”)]

<sup>20</sup> *Eni* was originally (prior to 1995) an acronym for *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* (National Hydrocarbons Board)

note that the mooring of the giant 220,000-tonne *Coral Sul* was completed on 04 March 2022.<sup>21</sup> However, the downside of all this geoeconomic interest is already being felt ashore — in northern Mozambique — where the security situation in the area of the town of Palma (and that generally obtaining north of the Cabo Delgado Province) had, in late-2021, deteriorated sharply into armed violence, leading the French company Total, which is the major operator and stakeholder (26.5%) in Area 1 of the Rovuma Basin to invoke *force majeure* while pulling out all its workers. While the company is now considering recommencing operations,<sup>22</sup> the intensity of the and extent of the violence forced Mozambique to “accept foreign troops from Rwanda and a bloc of southern African nations to help quell the insurgency, which had escalated across the southern African country's northernmost province of Cabo Delgado”.<sup>23</sup>

At a broader geopolitical level, the prolific analyst, David Scott, finds that “China’s success in island strategy has generated greater use of island resources by other States and mutual strategic cooperation over their island assets.”<sup>24</sup> China is, indeed, endeavouring with reasonable success, to wield increasing influence in the area — a case in point being Comoros, which lies right across the northern entrance/exit of the Mozambique Channel and can facilitate Beijing’s overtures towards island-States of the central and western Indian Ocean,<sup>25</sup> prompting status-quoist powers, such as the US, France, and India, to follow suit. This does much to explain the recent flurry of Indian diplomatic initiatives vis-à-vis Madagascar and Comoros<sup>26</sup> to supplement the long-standing Indian diplomatic engagement-mechanisms in Mauritius and Seychelles, as also enhanced cooperation between India and France, India and the EU, and India and the US, in the western and southwestern reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Major maritime-stakeholders within the Indo-Pacific, including China and India, recognise that “Alfred Mahan’s concepts of seapower value in islands are still valid but have been supplemented by various changes.... Some are military: the move from coal power to oil and nuclear power, the arrival of aircraft carriers and submarines, the advent of missiles and airpower. Some are technological: the ability of states to physically shape and create new island formation in the Indo-Pacific. Some are legal: in particular the United Nations Convention (UNCLOS) generating exclusive economic zones’ rising significance in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>27</sup> China is seen to be the revisionist power and the partnerships that the others are promoting conform to the dynamics of classic ‘Balance of Power’ theories — which deal with the systemic

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<sup>21</sup> Eni Consortium, “Coral South: the Gas Field off the Coast of Mozambique”, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/operations/mozambique-coral-south.html>

<sup>22</sup> Reuters, “Total Energies Aims to Restart \$20 billion Mozambique LNG Project in 2022”, 01 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/totalenergies-aims-restart-20-billion-mozambique-lng-project-2022-01-31/>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> David Scott, “Small Island Strategies in the Indo-Pacific by Large Powers”, *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 8, No 1 (Winter, 2021): 67

<sup>25</sup> C. Raja Mohan, “China’s Two-Ocean Strategy puts India in a Pincer” *Foreign Policy*, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/04/india-china-ocean-geopolitics-sri-lanka-maldives-comoros/>

<sup>26</sup> Akshay Narang, “After Vanilla Islands, India has a Defence Attaché in Madagascar. Checkmate China”, 28 December 2019, *TFI Post*, <https://tfipost.com/2019/12/after-vanilla-islands-india-has-a-defence-attache-in-madagascar-checkmate-china/>

**See Also:** Embassy of India, Antananarivo, “India-Madagascar Brief”, 10 February, 2020, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/madagascar\\_2020newn.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/madagascar_2020newn.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Scott, “Small Island Strategies in the Indo-Pacific by Large Powers”, *Supra* 16.

distribution of power without letting a single state dictate the power terms, both in terms of agreements and alliances, and is indispensable for preserving both peace and the *status quo*.<sup>28</sup>

Insofar as contemporary and likely geostrategy of these various maritime powers — in respect of the hitherto neglected ‘Vanilla Islands’ — is concerned, it may be instructive to review partnerships and developments that have been progressed thus far. Table 3 offers a very broad summary but one that it is hoped would be sufficiently indicative.

Constituent Entity of the ‘Vanilla Islands’	Important Indian-Ocean Partnership-Structures	Trestle of Co-operation	Major Powers Involved
Comoros	BRI/MSR, IOC, IORA, WIOMSA	Blue Economy, Climate Change Adaptation, HADR	China, EU, France, India, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia
Madagascar	BRI/MSR, IOC, IONS, IORA, SADC,	Blue Economy, HADR, Port Development, Surveillance	China, France, India, Russia, USA
Mauritius	BRI/MSR, IOC, IONS, IORA, SADC, WIOMSA	Blue Economy, Climate Change Adaptation, HADR, Resilient Infrastructure, CBMs, Surveillance, MDA, Defence Cooperation	China, France, EU, USA, India
Mayotte (France)	IOC, IONS, IORA, WIOMSA	Blue Economy, Climate Change Adaptation, HADR, Resilient Infrastructure, CBMs, Surveillance, MDA, Defence Cooperation	France, India
Reunion (France)	IOC, IONS, IORA, WIOMSA	Blue Economy, Climate Change Adaptation, HADR, Resilient Infrastructure, CBMs, Surveillance, MDA, Defence Cooperation	France, India
Seychelles	BRI/MSR, IOC, IONS, IORA, WIOMSA	Blue Economy, Climate Change Adaptation, HADR, Resilient Infrastructure, CBMs, Surveillance, MDA, Defence Cooperation	China, EU, France, India, Japan, USA,

**Abbreviations/Acronyms:** BRI/MSR: Belt and Road Initiative/Maritime Silk Route; IOC: Indian Ocean Commission; IORA: Indian Ocean Rim Association; IONS: Indian Ocean Naval Symposium; MDA: Maritime Domain Awareness; SADC: Southern African Development Community; WIOMSA: Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association

**Table 3**  
**‘Vanilla Islands’ Indian-Ocean Partnership-Structures and Major Powers Involved**  
**Source:** Authors

Each of the partnership-structures mentioned in Table 3 reflects an effort at building a ‘pluralistic security community’. Indeed, the concept of a ‘pluralistic security community’ is at the centre of security regionalism and is of great relevance to the manner in which Indian-Ocean partnerships are sought to be advanced with constituent entities of the ‘Vanilla Islands’. “A security community is considered to be ‘a group that has become integrated, where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with ‘reasonable’ certainty over a ‘long’ period of time”.<sup>29</sup> In a ‘pluralistic security community’, federalism is achieved before functionalism, and pluralistic security is, therefore, a particularly useful framework for integration in the face of

<sup>28</sup> Dina A Zinnes, “An Analytical Study of the Balance of Power Theories,” *Journal of Peace Research* 4, No 3 (1967): 271.

<sup>29</sup> Simon Koschut, “Regional Order and Peaceful Change: Security Communities as a *via media* in International Relations Theory”, *Cooperation and Conflict* 2014, Vol. 49(4), 519–535, DOI: 10.1177/0010836713517570

domain-specific security challenges. The partnership-structures that find mention in Table 3 reflect, on the one hand, the effort of China to work-with and influence each concerned constituent entity of the ‘Vanilla Islands’ to ‘bandwagon’ with it; and, on the other hand, the endeavour of the remaining (*status quo* powers) to maintain stability (assuring partners/allies), conserve and advance common as well as national interests, and maintain a desired balance of power. All these major players additionally seek to promote bilateral maritime cooperation, enhance their respective operational reach, engage in capacity-building, and capability-enhancement, and, strengthen maritime domain awareness. What are the drivers for the constituent entities of the ‘Vanilla Islands’ themselves to involve themselves in such partnership-structures? It is posited that their aim is to promote and contribute to a balance of power that will enable them to pursue and achieve sustainable (blue) growth, enhance their HDI rankings, and achieve economic prosperity focussed (if not centred) upon marine and maritime tourism. A common and sharp realisation amongst these ‘Vanilla Islands’ is that the aforementioned objectives are deeply dependent upon the adoption and promotion of a truly ‘blue’ economy (not to be confused-with or conflated-with the far more limited and restricted concept of merely an ‘ocean economy’). Hence, each of them is acutely aware of the potential that its enormous Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) holds, even while remaining simultaneously and equally-acutely aware of the need for assistance by way of capacity-building and capability-enhancement in preserving and protecting the wealth of the EEZ. This drives them to embrace (and even to initiate and promote) Indian Ocean partnership-structures such as those mentioned in Table 3.

### **India and Maritime Security of the ‘Vanilla Islands’**

India’s maritime policy — encapsulated in the acronym SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region) — reflects the maritime manifestation of India’s fundamental maritime interest (drawn from the Constitution of India), namely, “*to assure the economic, material, and societal wellbeing of the people of India*”.<sup>30</sup> India’s maritime strategy is driven by the need to preserve, pursue, promote, and protect the country’s eight principal maritime objectives. These are: (1) Protection from sea-based threats to India’s territorial integrity; (2) Stability (peace & prosperity) in India’s maritime neighbourhood; (3) The creation, development, and sustenance of a ‘Blue’ Economy that is resilient against adverse maritime effects of Climate-Change; (4) The preservation, promotion, pursuit and protection of offshore infrastructure and maritime resources within and beyond the Maritime Zones of India (MZI); (5) The promotion, protection and safety of India’s overseas and coastal seaborne trade and her Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and, the ports that constitute the nodes of this trade; (6) The provision of support to marine scientific research, including that in Antarctica and the Arctic; (7) The provision of support, succour, and extrication-options to the Indian Diaspora; and (8) Obtaining and retaining a favourable geostrategic maritime-position. Where the ‘Vanilla Islands’ are concerned, at least four of these eight objectives are of particular relevance. These are (1) Ensuring stability in India’s maritime neighbourhood; (2) The promotion, protection and safety of India’s overseas and coastal seaborne trade and her Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs); (3) The provision of holistic

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<sup>30</sup> Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, “India’s Proposed Maritime Strategy”, 03 February 2020, <https://maritimeindia.org/indias-proposed-maritime-strategy/>

**See Also:** Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, “Facing Strong Headwinds”, Ananta-Aspen Centre Policy Brief No 4, August 2016, <https://anantaaspencentre.in/policy-papers/policy-brief-04-maritime-india-facing-strong-headwinds-by-vice-ad>

maritime security -i.e., freedom from threats arising ‘in’ or ‘from’ the sea, and (4) Obtaining and retaining a regionally favourable geostrategic maritime vision. India’s contemporary ambition to be the *Preferred Security Provider* (implying a willingness to Step up to the plate and ensure holistic maritime security across the regional seascape through the proliferation of capacity and capability) can be best realised through cooperative structures. A ‘pluralistic security community’ provides the requisite trestles for such cooperation. A very brief summary of India’s contribution to the development and sustenance of just such a ‘pluralistic security community’ in respect of the four independent republics of the ‘Vanilla Islands’ (Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, and Madagascar) is placed in the succeeding paragraphs.

**Mauritius.** Mauritius is an oceanic partner that sits at the heart of India’s strategic vision of the southwestern Indian Ocean. Thus, it is particularly fitting that India’s outward-leaning and forward-looking maritime policy (SAGAR) itself was first enunciated (in 2015) in Mauritius. The official Indian position has long been that the State of Mauritius not only includes the four islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues, Saint Brandon, and Agaléga, but also sixty-plus islands (including Diego Garcia) that are contained within the seven atolls of the Chagos Archipelago. The UK’s refusal to hand the archipelago back to Mauritius flies in the face of the United Nations and is patently violative of the principles of international law. In this context, India would do well to add the weight of its very considerable influence, capacity and capability, to existing ‘pluralistic security communities’ such as the IOC, through which it could better support the claim of Mauritius. In terms of capacity-building (material wherewithal) as well as capability-enhancement (human competence-development, training, organisation, etc.), India has been a significant contributor to the holistic security of the State of Mauritius. In both regards, the efforts of the Indian Navy are deserving of particular and entirely laudatory mention. India has been engaged in maritime-security capacity-building in Mauritius at least since 1974, when an indigenously built (at the GRSE, Kolkata) patrol boat, the *Amar*, was gifted to the Mauritius Police Force. Since then, India has provided Mauritius with as many as nine Indian-built ships of increasing size and complexity, some being replacements for others.<sup>31</sup> Officers on deputation from the Indian Navy to the Mauritius Police Force have, over the years, been instrumental in setting-up and developing the impressive capability of the Mauritius Coast Guard, which remains the principal agency responsible for the maritime-security of this important constituent of the ‘Vanilla Islands’. To enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA), a shore-based coastal radar chain, capable of receiving inputs from the Automatic Identification System that the IMO has mandated for all merchant vessels of 300 tonnes or greater displacement, has been installed with Indian assistance. Finance for all this has been facilitated by a series of Lines of Credit extended by the Government of India. Even outside of direct financial arrangements, India’s contribution to the maritime security of Mauritius remains significant and includes extensive hydrographic surveys, and regular airborne as well as surface-based surveillance of the country’s vast EEZ and its protection against IUU fishing and other forms of maritime crime. Data on ‘white-shipping’ (merchant-shipping) is shared between the two countries and the consolidated picture is thereafter developed and disseminated by India’s IFC-IOR fusion centre, wherein Mauritius, like several other partners, has an International Liaison Officer (ILO) positioned. The development

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<sup>31</sup> Iqbal Ahmed Khan, *L’Express*, 23 August 2021, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202108240272.html>

of facilities in the country's outlying islands, especially its northern outpost of Agaléga, too, has been an area of focus of Indian security-assistance.<sup>32</sup>

**Seychelles.** In the Seychelles, too, the story of Indian assistance in terms of holistic maritime security is very similar (and only marginally less extensive) to that of Mauritius. Capacity-building incorporates the provision of patrol vessels (the *Topaz*, the *Constant*, the *Hermes*, the *Zoroaster*, etc.), the setting-up of shore-based repair, refit and maintenance facilities for the Seychelles Coast Guard Service (SCGS), the establishment of a shore-based chain of coastal radars and AIS receivers for the enhancement of MDA, elaborate training engagements, extensive hydrographic surveys, and regular EEZ patrols, the development of the archipelago's farther atolls and islands such as Assumption Island, easy financing through generous lines of credit, and so forth.

**Comoros.** The visit of the Hon'ble Vice President of India, Mr Venkaiah Naidu, to Comoros in October of 2019, led to the signing of several MoUs, including one on defence, in which cooperation in maritime security was predominant.<sup>33</sup> India has since extended a Line of Credit of USD 20 million for the procurement of high-speed interceptor craft, apart from which the Indian Navy has itself gifted two such boats to the National Agency of Maritime Affairs (ANAM), which promotes Comoros's National Maritime and Port Policy. In Comoros, Indian efforts are pitted against China's own endeavours and the latter are far better financed. Once again, therefore, the choice before India is whether to remain obsessed with lamenting its 'weaker hand', namely, spare 'capacity' or to play to its 'strong suit', namely, 'capability' and maximise the latter through the strengthening of a 'pluralistic security community'.

**Madagascar.** Indian involvement in developing and/or enhancing the maritime security of Madagascar has been incremental at best. This is now changing for the better, owing in large measure to the proactive naval diplomacy of the Indian Navy, ably supported and guided by India's Ministry of External Affairs and most especially by its learned, erudite, and dynamic Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr S Jaishankar. Thus, apart from the initiation of joint surveillance of the EEZ of Madagascar by the Indian Navy and its Malagasy counterpart,<sup>34</sup> there is an active and extremely promising effort at enhancing MDA through the development of cooperative interfaces between Madagascar's Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC), the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) based in Seychelles, and India's outstanding 'Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region' (IFC-IOR). The fact that the RMIFC and the RCOC have been developed under the aegis of the Indian Ocean Commission automatically brings new dynamism to India's maritime engagement of the EU (especially France) and, once again, serves to strengthen the concept of a 'pluralistic security community'.

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<sup>32</sup>Ministry of External Affairs, "List of Agreements/MoUs signed between India and Mauritius during the visit of the Prime Minister to Mauritius", 11 March, 2015, [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24900/List\\_of\\_AgreementsMoUs\\_signed\\_between\\_India\\_and\\_Mauritius\\_during\\_the\\_visit\\_of\\_the\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Mauritius\\_March\\_11\\_2015](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24900/List_of_AgreementsMoUs_signed_between_India_and_Mauritius_during_the_visit_of_the_Prime_Minister_to_Mauritius_March_11_2015).

<sup>33</sup> Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs Media Centre, "India-Comoros Joint Statement during State Visit of Vice President to Comoros (October 10-12, 2019)", 12 October 2019, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31937/IndiaComoros\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_Vice\\_President\\_to\\_Comoros\\_October\\_1012\\_2019](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31937/IndiaComoros_Joint_Statement_during_State_Visit_of_Vice_President_to_Comoros_October_1012_2019)

<sup>34</sup> Dipanjan Roy-Chaudhury, "Indo-Pacific Outreach: India Conducts Maiden Joint Naval Patrolling with Madagascar", Economic Times, 25 March 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indo-pacific-outreach-india-conducts-maiden-joint-naval-patrolling-with-madagascar/articleshow/81681981.cms>

It should never be forgotten that the word “security” in the expression ‘pluralistic security community’ refers to holistic security and is not limited to traditional or military security alone. A vivid example of the Indian Navy’s innate grasp of this concept is offered by the numerous ‘SAGAR’ missions undertaken by it across the length and breadth of the Indian Ocean through the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>35</sup>

For instance, in the mini ‘regional security complex’<sup>36</sup> of the Southwest Indian Ocean, the security concerns of Mozambique<sup>37</sup> could well impact the Mozambique Channel and, thence, the Vanilla Islands.

## Conclusion

Maritime security challenges — whether traditional or non-traditional — are diversifying due to changes in the agency of actors to inflict violence. Moreover, stability in any maritime space is dictated by a host of factors, and the existence of conflict — even a potential conflict — not only jeopardises internal stability, but impacts stability in its proximate neighbourhood. A ‘pluralistic security community’ that is exclusively set in the maritime theatre of the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to have a shared set of security threats, as also the potential to evade them. Non-traditional security challenges at sea are even more disruptive if the coastline of a State is coupled with a lack of maritime governance. The capacity and capability of the constituent entities of the ‘Vanilla Islands’ in handling disruptive and destabilising threats could be enhanced manifold if they could forge institutional cooperation through a pluralistic security community framework. India needs to extend its maritime policy of SAGAR across a more evenly balanced geography than is currently provided by the country’s pronounced tilt to the east (Look East, Act East). If this can inform future policy, Indian will be better able to realise its very-considerable potential in terms of creating and sustaining a favourable stability-security paradigm in the Southwest Indian Ocean Region.

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<sup>35</sup> Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar, “Mission SAGAR: Maintaining a Positive and Favourable Maritime Environment in the Face of the Covid Pandemic”, National Maritime Foundation Website, 15 June 2020, <https://maritimeindia.org/mission-sagar/>

**See Also:** Indian Navy Official website, “Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: Overseas Operations”, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/overseas-operations>

<sup>36</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, “*Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*” (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

<sup>37</sup> International Crisis Group, “Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado”, 11 June, 2021.

**About the Authors:**

*Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, AVSM & Bar, VSM, IN (Retd), is the Director-General of the National Maritime Foundation (NMF). He is a prolific writer and a globally renowned strategic analyst who specialises in a wide-range of maritime affairs and related issues. He may be contacted at [directorgeneral.nmfindia@gmail.com](mailto:directorgeneral.nmfindia@gmail.com)*

*Anum Khan has only just completed a six-month internship at the NMF and is moving into a Research Associate position. Her current area of research interest is the East African littoral and issues related to the 'Vanilla Islands'. She may be contacted at [amgs2.nmf@gmail.com](mailto:amgs2.nmf@gmail.com)*