

India and the Strategic Salience of The Mozambique Channel States – Case for A More Robust Partnership with Comoros, Madagascar and Mozambique

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Introduction

India's May 2014 general elections were unprecedented in that they gave a decisive mandate to a party on its own after years of coalition governments. Given India's regional pre-eminence the impact of the elections extended well beyond India's borders. From a maritime perspective the swearing – in ceremony of the new government brought an unexpected dividend. The ceremony generally followed the convention by inviting the political leadership of the countries of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). There however was one exception, Mr. Navinchandra Ramgoolam the Prime Minister of Mauritius, the only non - SAARC leader to be invited for the swearing - in. While the diasporic connect may have been the reason for inviting Mr. Ramgoolam, it emphatically brought India out of the narrow South Asia box and placed its extended maritime neighbourhood back in its strategic radar.

Following the *neighbourhood first* policy, Mr. Modi the new Prime Minister selected Bhutan to be the first country for his visit, in 2014. The maritime neighbourhood's turn came in 2015 when the Prime Minister visited Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. During his Mauritius visit Mr. Modi articulated India's vision for engaging with its maritime neighbours. He termed the vision SAGAR which means the 'sea' in Hindi. It is also an acronym for Security and Growth for All in the Region. The vision aims to deepen India's economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and island states, build their maritime security capacities and their economic strength, and ensure peace, stability and prosperity in the region. The Prime Minister also articulated that the Indian Ocean Region was at the top of India's policy priorities.¹ Tellingly, Mr. Modi chose the commissioning ceremony of the Indian built Mauritian coastguard vessel the Barracuda to put forth the SAGAR vision thus underlining India's resolve in capacity building of its maritime neighbours. Mr. Modi also said that India sought a climate of trust and transparency.

In July 2018 while on a visit to Kenya, the Prime Minister announced ten guiding principles for India - Africa engagement.² The principles most germane to this paper being:

*“Our (India’s) development partnership will be guided by your (Africa’s) priorities; We (India) will build as much local capacity and create local opportunities as possible; We (India) will work with African nations to keep the oceans open and free for the benefit of all nations.”*³ For India the Indian Ocean is a vital subregion of the Indo- Pacific. In November 2019, Mr. Modi announced the Indo - Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok which *aims to ensure a safe, secure and stable maritime domain in the Indo - Pacific.*⁴ The IPOI among other pillars comprises maritime security, maritime transport and capacity building. Maritime security and capacity building are two prominent common strands in the above initiatives.

India’s Strategic Significance of The Mozambique Channel

Seas are the preferred medium of the global flow of goods and commodities. Approximately 95 percent of India’s trade by volume and 68 percent by value is moved by sea.⁵ While the trade during peace time is moved using the international shipping lanes (ISLs), in times of tension countries may mandate alternate routes. These alternate routes are called those countries’ sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The maritime chokepoints along the ISLs are critical to the international trade. The disruption of any maritime chokepoint could upset seaborne trade and cause turbulence in supply chains worldwide.

Fig 1: The Indian Ocean ISLs and chokepoints



Source: <https://journalsofindia.com/maritime-choke-points-of-indian-ocean/>

India’s trade passes through chokepoints and around capes and peninsulas of Indian Ocean **in the southeast (the Malacca Strait, Singapore Strait and the Malay peninsula) and southwest (Cape of Good Hope, Cape Agulhas and the Mozambique Channel).** Enabled by a kind geography by way of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India dominates the Six - Degree Channel, the western feeder channel to the Malacca

and Singapore Straits. This facilitates India's trade security in the Malacca and Singapore Straits. On the other hand, there are no Indian territories proximate to the Cape of Good Hope (CGH) and the Mozambique Channel to facilitate India's trade protection.

The Mozambique Channel is a crucial maritime chokepoint and some 30% of global tanker traffic passes through the channel. It is also the location of some of the world's largest gas reserves.⁶ The channel derives added salience from the oil discovered in Tsimiroro in western Madagascar.⁷ Africa is one of the major sources of India's hydrocarbons which are transported by sea. Following India's reintegration with the world economy in 1991, Indian trade with Africa grew at a faster pace than her trade with the trans-Atlantic economies.⁸ Nigeria was the fourth largest supplier of crude oil and LNG to India in 2020. It is Africa's largest economy and is one of India's major trade partners. During 2019 - 20 Indian exports to Nigeria were US\$ 3.61 billion and imports were US \$ 10.21 billion.⁹ India also has thriving trade relations with Brazil. In 2018 - 19 India's exports to Brazil were US\$ 3.8 billion and imports were US\$ 4.4 billion. Among other commodities, India imported crude oil from Brazil and exported petroleum products.¹⁰ India's seaborne trade with Nigeria and Brazil as well as with other African countries transits the ISLs and maritime chokepoints abutting the Mozambique Channel States comprising Comoros, Madagascar and Mozambique. Most of South Africa's trade with India too moves through this route.¹¹ There are emerging security concerns in the Mozambique Channel. The terror group Ansar al - Sunna claimed responsibility for siege of the Mozambique Channel port city of Palma in April 2021 leading to fears of Mozambique Channel becoming a security hotspot. The group had earlier in 2017 and 2020 captured the strategic port town of Mocimboa da Praia, about 80 kilometres south of Palma.¹² In 2010 the Mozambique Channel had experienced several piratical incidents including the hijacking of an Indian merchant vessel.¹³ There is likelihood of such a spectre returning to the Mozambique Channel since piracy, cargo theft, vessel seizure and kidnapping of crews are financially lucrative for terror groups. The protection of its maritime trade provides a compelling rationale for India to engage with the Mozambique Channel States.

The trends shaping the shipping industry are likely to result in a step - up in trade including the Indian trade that transits the Mozambique Channel. The industry capitalises on the economy of scale through larger vessels. These vessels bring economic dividends in building and operating costs, but also significant challenges, particularly in restricted waters. This fact was vividly brought to the world attention by MV Ever Given incident in March 2021.¹⁴ Further, the ultra large crude carriers, with deadweight between 300,000 and 500,000 tonnes cannot transit fully laden through the Suez Canal.¹⁵ Vessels with high windage area such as wood chip carriers, car carriers and large container carriers face exaggerated adverse effects of wind while transiting narrow waters like the Suez Canal. Other challenges include reputational loss for the operators if their vessel is involved in an incident. The foregoing factors coalesce to bring a renewed focus on the Mozambique Channel as an alternative to the Suez Canal. The channel's oil and gas reserves too are a powerful strategic currency. The Mozambique Channel thus possesses enhanced strategic significance for India and the Mozambique Channel States unique leverage.

Trade Protection

Zheng He the 15th century Chinese admiral had in 1411 erected in Sri Lanka’s port city of Galle a stone tablet invoking the blessings of Hindu deities for a peaceful world built on trade.¹⁶ Since Zheng He’s sailing days six hundred years ago the world has been knitted together through globalisation which has increased trade’s salience severalfold. “*External trade in goods and services accounted for 16.2 per cent of India’s national income in 1950 and remained around this level till 1990. By 2010 the number was up at over 50.0 per cent, making India more trade - dependent than many OECD economies...*”¹⁷ In an address to India’s export community the commerce minister Mr. Piyush Goyal made a strong case for India to reclaim its historical position as a great trading nation. The minister set a target of \$ 2 trillion in exports by 2030.¹⁸

Seas are the primary conduit of international trade and “*for sea trade no country is so centrally situated (as India is).*”¹⁹ Approximately 95% of India’s trade by volume and 68% by value is moved through Maritime Transport.²⁰ In 2020 - 21 India imported over 84 percent of its crude oil and petroleum products.²¹ India exported petroleum products worth over US \$21,406 million in the same period.²² Given its dependency on seaborne trade, any malevolent interference can impose energy and commodity denial on India. Considering the instability and terrorism that bedevils Mozambique and which threatens to spill into the maritime domain²³ it would be naïve to take the

Fig 3: Cape of Good Hope and Mozambique Channel



Source: Google maps

safety of India's trade around the Mozambique Channel for granted. Therefore, it is necessary for India to ensure that the ISLs and chokepoints that abut the Mozambique Channel States remain safe and secure.

Remittances are a vital source of household income in the developing economies. According to the World Bank, India is on track to receive yearly remittances of over \$100 billion in 2022.²⁴ Indian seafarers constitute approximately 10% of the total workforce in the international shipping²⁵ and are a rich source of foreign remittances. They face a gamut of threats at sea like piracy, maritime terrorism and kidnapping. The safety of the Indian seafarers will be a significant spinoff of ensuring safe and secure ISLs. It will also incentivise more Indian youth to make seafaring a preferred career option.

Strategic Influences in The Mozambique Channel Region

The Mozambique Channel presents a complex arabesque. The anti - piracy operations off Somalia, just north of the channel, saw the presence of several countries and groupings including the US, Japan, India, China, South Korea, EU and NATO. Nearby Djibouti hosts the military bases of Germany, Spain, Italy, France, the US, the UK, China and Saudi Arabia.²⁶

France is present in the channel's vicinity on account of La Reunion and Mayotte islands both of which are départements of metropolitan France. France also is a former colonial power of the Comoros and Madagascar both of which are members of Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. Portugal's interests are centred on Mozambique which was formerly a Portuguese colony and is a member of Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa. In recent times the discovery of gas in the offshore region called Rovuma Basin brought in several players to the region. The US firm Anadarko and the Italian energy firm Eni hold the two largest offshore investments in north-east Mozambique. China national petroleum company bought a 28 percent stake in Eni's Mozambique project. Japanese group Mitsui holds 20 percent stake in the project led by Anadarko. South Korean energy firm Korean gas corporation holds a 10 percent stake in Eni's project. India's oil and gas firms too bought significant stakes in Anadarko's Mozambique holdings.²⁷ The Tsimiroro heavy oil development located onshore in Madagascar is expected to start commercial production in 2025²⁸ which will no doubt bring in additional extra regional players. The deterrence provided by naval or coastguard units in an area ensures unimpeded and safe shipping for all trading vessels in that area regardless of the flags they fly, and the cargo interests they represent. Therefore, Indian trade protection deployment in the Mozambique Channel will likely be viewed favourably.

India's Relations with The Mozambique Channel States

Comoros and Madagascar both belong to a group of islands in the southwest Indian Ocean area called the Vanilla Islands. The term vanilla is used because the flavouring substance vanilla is a major export from these countries. **Mozambique on the south-east coast of**

Africa defines the western border of its eponymous channel, Madagascar forms the channel's eastern boundary, and the Comoros is positioned at the northern end of the channel.

Mozambique has historical, cultural and economic ties to Portugal. Comoros and Madagascar are in the cultural orbit of France. In economic and human development index (HDI) terms these countries trail the other countries of the region. Due to their strategic geo-location, they are pre-eminently suitable for India's trade protection. As a sign of their intensifying strategic significance, in December 2019 the ministry of external affairs brought Madagascar and Comoros into its Indian Ocean region division. They were earlier a part of the East and Southern Africa division.

Fig 4: Comoros, Madagascar and Mozambique



Source: Study.Com; <https://study.com/academy/lesson/comoros-islands-map-capital.html>

Comoros

The Union of Comoros, a former French Colony, is an archipelago of three islands Anjouan, Moheli, and Grande Comore. All three islands are located at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel. Comoros is ranked 156 in terms of HDI.²⁹ Its low HDI notwithstanding, Comoros has always been valued for its strategic position.³⁰

The former Vice - President M Venkaiah Naidu's visit to Comoros in 2018 indicates the island nation's enhanced strategic importance for India.³¹ Six MOUs for cooperation and a grant and a Line of Credit of USD 20 million was announced by India during

the vice-presidential visit.³² The MOUs included one for cooperation in defence and the grants Included that for interceptor boats. A flurry of naval activity cements the upward trajectory of Comoros – India bilateral relations. INS *Mumbai* and INS *Trikand* paid a goodwill visit to Comoros in May 2018. INS *Kesari* visited in June 2020 to bolster the country’s pandemic related health security. INS *Jalaswa* Visited Comoros in 2021 to deliver food grain. INS *Kesari* paid another visit in January 2022 and assisted the Comorian coastguard in repairing a petrol vessel.³³

Twelve diplomats from Comoros attended the first Special Course for diplomats of the Indian Ocean Region in New Delhi in 2021.³⁴ Comoros has sovereignty issues over island territories with former colonial power France. India’s historical anti-colonialism credentials provide it a soft power denied to other countries vying for influence in this strategic island nation. **Comoros** however is the only Indian Ocean state in which Delhi does not have a full diplomatic mission.

Madagascar

The island nation of Madagascar has a strategic location along the east of the Mozambique Channel. It is the fifth largest island in the world, with a land mass of 587,000 km² and 26.5 million inhabitants. Madagascar is ranked 173 in terms of HDI.³⁵

The India- Madagascar relations have seen an upward trajectory since former President Ramnath Kovind’s visit to the island nation in 2018. During the presidential visit bilateral agreements were signed on defence and aviation cooperation.³⁶ The enhanced strategic relevance of Madagascar manifests itself in an uptick in India’s naval engagement with the nation. In March 2020, INS *Shardul* assisted with Madagascar’s food security when there were heavy floods in its northern region. In May 2020 under Op SAGAR - I, INS *Kesari* provided food items, medicines and medical assistance to Madagascar. As part of Op VANILLA INS *Airawat* in 2020 was the first responder in the aftermath of cyclone Diane when she arrived in Madagascar to provide relief assistance. INS *Jalashwa* conducted training of the Malagasy Special Forces in 2021. The ship also carried food grains and medicines to assist dealing with a severe drought. The Regional Maritime Information International Fusion Centre in Madagascar facilitates intelligence sharing through interface with India’s Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region.

Other engagements include the Malagasy diplomats’ attendance at the course for IOR diplomats in India and the establishment of India - Madagascar Chamber of Commerce. The chamber brings together policy makers and businessmen for enhanced trade. Madagascar on its part supported India’s entry into Indian Ocean Commission as an observer in March 2020 and the Djibouti Code of Conduct in August 2020.

Mozambique

Having a latitudinal spread from 10° 40’ S to 26° 52’ S Mozambique on Africa’s southeast coast has a coastline of over 1,300 nautical miles. With well - located ports Mozambique

is well placed for a decisive influence on the Mozambique Channel. Mozambique's deep-water ports sustain much of the region, linking landlocked neighbours and northern South Africa to countries beyond the African continent.³⁷ Mozambique is ranked 185 in terms of HDI.³⁸

India had provided maritime security to Mozambique during the African Union Summit in 2003 and the World Economic Forum in 2004.³⁹ In 2006, India and Mozambique entered a defence cooperation agreement that envisages joint maritime patrols and technology transfer. In 2015, India resurrected a dormant joint-defence working group with Maputo, expanding training and capacity-building aid to Mozambique's intelligence service. Prime Minister Modi visited Mozambique in 2016 underlining the convergence of energy and security interests. The Defence Minister Mr Rajnath Singh visited Mozambique in 2019. The minister announced assistance of communication equipment and cooperation in the maritime domain. Two interceptor boats were handed over to Mozambique during the visit.⁴⁰ The IN ships have visited Mozambique frequently. IN Ships *Sujata*, *Shardul* and *Magar* called at Beira in March 2019 to provide humanitarian aid in the wake of cyclone Idai. INS *Tarakash* called at Maputo in September 2019. In December 2021 under Op SAGAR INS *Kesari* delivered food aid to Mozambique as well as carried two interceptor craft and self – defence equipment for the armed forces of Mozambique.

Indian Public Section Undertakings (PSUs) – OVL, BPRL and Oil India together have a combined stake of 30% in the Rovuma Area-I gas field.⁴¹ Major Indian companies like Tata Steel, Jindal Steel, the Essar group, Coal India and Damodar Ferro have invested in coal, iron ore and other minerals.⁴² Mozambique is also well placed to emerge as an alternate source for India's energy needs.

Towards A More Robust Engagement

Given below are some suggestions for India's more robust engagement with the Mozambique Channel States:

Maritime Governance

Since 2017, there has been an ongoing insurgency in Cabo Delgado which threatens the security in the Mozambique Channel.⁴³ The threat of piracy also dogs the Mozambique Channel.⁴⁴ Owing to the capacity constraints and huge areas of maritime jurisdiction of the Mozambique Channel States, there is a maritime governance deficit in the Mozambique channel. In a raid in 2020, the terrorist group al-Sunna briefly captured the Mozambique port of Mocimboa da Praia in a sophisticated and well-coordinated attack from land and sea.⁴⁵ The security for Anadarko and Eni the two firms exploring gas in the Mozambique Channel was provided by private security companies due to inadequate capacity of the regional navies and coastguards.⁴⁶ With enhanced maritime capabilities and as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean there is a strong case for India to increase its footprint in the Mozambique Channel. Such an action ensures India's trade protection, facilitates unimpeded commerce and effective maritime governance. Mozambique has

capacity building requirements in counterinsurgency and logistics field too.⁴⁷ The Indian army with its vast counterinsurgency experience is well placed for fulfilling this role.

India's Border Security Force deploys vessels known as floating border out-posts (FBOP) for protecting the country's maritime borders. The Floating Border out-posts (FBOP) act as base for fast patrol boats, crew members and are equipped with surveillance and communication equipment.⁴⁸ India should consider equipping the Mozambique Channel States with FBOPs to enhance security in their waters.

Environmental Security

A Cape-class bulk carrier, Japanese vessel MV *Wakashio*, had run aground off Mauritius on 25 July 2020.⁴⁹ The vessel leaked about 1000 tonnes of oil into the water on 6 August 2020 causing an environmental catastrophe for the island nation's fragile ecosystem. The Mozambique Channel States sit astride busy ISLs and are vulnerable to ship traffic related oil pollution. The Mozambique Channel States are unable to meet their environmental security needs due to capacity constraints. Helping them to strengthen their environmental security would constitute an approach centred on those countries' major area of concern.

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) with advance capability and training expertise in marine pollution and in laws against ship-sourced pollution should assist the Mozambique Channel States in strengthening their environmental security. The ICG should also assist in negotiating with the International Maritime Organisation for classifying the surrounding waters as Particularly Sensitive Sea Area.⁵⁰ This will mitigate the threat through routeing, strict application of MARPOL and installation of Vessel Traffic Services.⁵¹ Facilitating the Mozambique Channel States towards a robust oil-spill-response plan will also be a step in the right direction. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways has an MOU with Malta for bilateral cooperation in the field of marine pollution prevention, a similar arrangement may be envisioned for the Mozambique Channel States.⁵²

Assisting the Mozambique Channel States in the technical capacity building for environmental management may also be considered. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate change engages with the scientific community for R&D in technologies for environmental management. The Ministry has the remit to assist other developing countries in capacity building for environmental management.⁵³

Capacity Building and Livelihood Resilience

Economic development is a more enduring foundation for partnership than engagement underpinned by historical or civilisational links alone. Through enhanced employment opportunities such initiatives not only strengthen the Mozambique Channel States' economic sinews but also address issues such as instability and violence.

Flags of Convenience

Flags of Convenience (FOC) is a system where ships' owners register the vessels with flag states other than that of the owners' countries. The FOC are perceived as exploitative and unethical organisations. The United Nation Commission on Trade and Development report is more objective,

“Historically, the decision to “flag out” was associated with lower registration costs.... however, the factors also include efficiency (reducing delays due to port inspections because of a ship register’s good reputation), certification, links to a supportive cluster of financial and logistic services (enabling higher logistics performance) and the presence of a cybersecurity framework.”⁵⁴

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is an island group in the Pacific Ocean that covers a mere 113 square kilometres. It is an FOC and the second largest ship registry in the world. The RMI’s country brief notes, *“External grants, taxation, fishing receipts and shipping registry fees are the key sources of government revenue.”⁵⁵* Panama, Liberia and the RMI (all FOC) accounted for the registration of more than sixty per cent of the world shipping in 2016.⁵⁶ Comoros is an established FOC albeit with a poor track record.⁵⁷ India is home to outstanding merchant marine professionals who have excellent reputation in international shipping. Using its pool of technical managers, The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways should assist the Ship Registry of the Union of Comoros to improve its international competitive profile. Such an endeavour will induce confidence among the shipowners in the Ship Registry of the Union of Comoros. A mark up in the shipping registries will provide vastly increased revenue for the country.

Seafarers are a rich source of foreign currency inflows. The estimated over 500,000 Filipino seamen, are said to have remitted \$6.539 billion to their home country in 2019.⁵⁸ Improving the quality of the seafarers of the Mozambique Channel States through superior training will improve their standing in the maritime world and enhance nations’ overseas remittance. India should provide these seafarers seats in the Indian training institutes as also encourage Indian shipowners to hire their services. Assisting the countries with establishing local training facilities and improving the existing facilities should be progressed simultaneously.

Crew Change

“Maritime transport depends on the 2 million seafarers who operate the world’s merchant ships, which carry more than 80% of global trade by volume...”⁵⁹ Timely crew change is critical for ensuring a sustainable and safe shipping. Since crewing is the largest controllable part of a vessel’s operating budget, costs such as crew travel often receives a great deal of scrutiny.⁶⁰ The crew change occurs either at the vessels’ destination ports or at transit ports along major ISLs which minimise maritime deviation. The latter option is usually taken when vessels are calling at remote ports.

For ports, crew change accrues several benefits by way of revenue through pilotage, ship agencies, transport, hotels and visa fees. Such visits also increase employment opportunities. To optimise time utilization during crew-change calls, the vessels take on bunkers, fresh water, provisions, deck stores, spares and bonded goods. Urgent repairs which are beyond the crew’s scope, periodical surveys and servicing of vessels’ firefighting and life - saving appliances may also be undertaken. These activities generate

Fig 5: Mozambique Channel states' location along the ISLs

Source: Google maps

an ecosystem that may constitute pilotage companies, marine workshops, classification societies, ship chandlers, bunker stations and barges, water barges, tugs, mooring boats, pilot launches, mooring gangs and security personnel which generate additional employment opportunities. The proclivity to shopping by the off-signing crew will likely energise the local businesses.

The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways should utilise the services of Indian merchant marine professionals to strategize the principal Mozambique Channel States ports to emerge as attractive destination for crew change. The ministry should also incentivise the Indian crewing agencies to arrange their crew change at Mozambique Channel States ports. This would enhance the confidence of the international shipping community for crew change in the Mozambique Channel States ports.

Transshipment Hub

India's first mega transshipment container terminal is under development at Vizhinjam, Kerala where the peninsular India comes close to the ISLs and east - west shipping axis.⁶¹

Transshipment relates to moving containers from one vessel to another while in transit. The concept of transshipment hubs was envisioned for shipping lines' strategy of limiting ports of call for large carriers and servicing small ports with inadequate accessibility and limited port infrastructure by smaller vessels. The hub provides connectivity between long - distance deep - sea lines and short - distance feeder lines and optimises the efficiency of maritime container shipping networks.

The concept of transshipment has witnessed enormous growth due to the vessels' enlargement. Geography plays an important role and countries at the crossroads of major ISLs hold enormous advantages by offering low maritime deviation. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways should assist suitable Mozambique Channel States ports in emerging as quality transshipment hubs. Inexpensive manpower, abundant yard space aligned with the capacities of the ultra - large ships is likely to provide additional ballast to the locational advantage of the Mozambique Channel States ports. Yard space can be a significant challenge for existing ports of the region that provide such services.

Ships' Recycling

Recycling of ships that are approaching their end – of - life is an important economic activity which provides employment opportunity and enables recycling of scrap steel, machinery and electronic equipment. The steel obtained from ships' hulls is a source of ferrous scrap particularly suited for reprocessing into simple steel products used in civil engineering.⁶² It is well and truly a growth industry and is predicted to double by 2028, and quadruple by 2033.⁶³ India has one of the largest ship recycling facilities in the world with over 150 yards along its coast. Close to 6.2 million GT is scrapped in India every year, which accounts for 33% of the total scrapped tonnage in the world.⁶⁴ As a responsible world player and destination for green ship recycling India can facilitate the Mozambique Channel States' entry into this growth industry.⁶⁵ The Mozambique Channel States' location close to major ISLs ensures minimum maritime deviation for the vessels' final voyage. The Gujrat Maritime Board (GMB) has vast experience in the training needs of recycling yard workers.⁶⁶ Through their vast experience, the industry can enable the Mozambique Channel States to identify suitable ports and make them international conventions compliant. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways in association with GMB can engage with the Mozambique Channel States for the training of the yard workers.

The public sector undertakings (PSU) in strategic sectors are important for India's overseas engagement. The PSUs integrate engaging with society and environmental concerns in their business operations. In June 2022 India and Vietnam signed an MoU on mutual logistics support agreement and defence partnership.⁶⁷ The work done over the years by ONGC Videsh is said to have laid the ground for India Vietnam meeting.⁶⁸

The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways should envision a SAGARMALA Videsh for the Mozambique Channel States's port development initiatives. The ministry may also leverage the expertise of India's entrepreneurial and nimble footed private sector in Public Private Partnership mode.⁶⁹ JSW Infrastructure operates ports on both west and

east coasts of India and a terminal at Fujairah, UAE.⁷⁰ Adani Enterprises Ltd operates Abbot Point Terminal in Queensland, Australia.⁷¹ Their experience will complement the expertise of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. Ports' development initiative is also likely to facilitate SAGARMALA Videsh enter the development of ports for the Mozambique Channel States' future LNG and oil shipments. The Ministry of Earth Sciences may also engage the Mozambique Channel States to explore areas of cooperation in the field of Blue Economy.⁷²

Adroit Statecraft

The presence of a full - fledged diplomatic mission in a country enables India to shape its international posture, enhance its strategic interests and indicates unconditional resolve to engage with that country. India does not have a permanent diplomatic representation in Comoros and the Indian Embassy in Madagascar is concurrently accredited to Comoros.⁷³ Absence of an embassy in Comoros is inconsistent with India's primacy and vision in the Indian Ocean. The fact that China an extra regional power maintains an embassy in Moroni and India does not is analogous to strategic neglect. India should address this issue decisively. A Defence Attaché - at - large will be able to shape India's military ties with all three countries and needs consideration.

Admiral Gorshkov had famously opined, "*Soviet naval seamen... feel themselves ambassadors for our country.*"⁷⁴ Unlike the other military services the navies are unique in having a diplomatic role. Located firmly in the maritime domain as the Mozambique Channel States are, certain sea mindedness and nautical moorings are in order for the national representatives. Therefore, persons with maritime background should be among those considered for ambassadorial appointments in the Mozambique Channel States. Such persons will not only conduct the diplomatic functions with elan but also have a nuanced understanding of the maritime issues. They will be able to deal with such issues with greater sophistication, incisiveness and nous.

Australia perceives for itself a leadership role in the Pacific Ocean just as India does in the Indian Ocean. Australia indicates its resoluteness to engage with the Pacific States through a federal minister for the Pacific, a post currently held by The Hon Pat Conroy, MP.⁷⁵ A portfolio with Indian Ocean appellation similar to the Australian portfolio will elevate the status of India's engagement with its maritime neighbours and provide them with greater political attention.

Meetings on the sidelines of major summits have gained traction in contemporary statecraft. The Indian union territory of Puducherry and the state of Goa have strong historical links to France and Portugal respectively. Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) is an organisation of eighty - eight member countries where French is the customary language.⁷⁶ Comoros and Madagascar are members and Mozambique is an associate member. Similarly, Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP) is a global organization of nations where Portuguese is an official language.⁷⁷ Mozambique is a member and India became an associate member in 2021. India should press its case

for full membership of both the organizations. Such memberships will provide India with additional platforms to deepen its engagement with the Mozambique Channel States.

Conclusion

The Mozambique Channel is a pivotal maritime trade route and chokepoint. India's trade with its trade partners in Africa and South America transits the Mozambique Channel and the nearby ISLs. For ensuring the security of India's trade that transits the Mozambique Channel and the proximate ISLs; the Mozambique Channel States comprising Comoros, Madagascar and Mozambique assume great strategic salience. With the Mozambique Channel States emerging as key oil and natural gas reservoir, a step - up in the engagement will also provide India with alternate source for its energy needs. For its trade security and the future energy supplies India needs to robustly engage with the Mozambique Channel States.

Owing to maritime governance deficit in the Mozambique channel and capacity constraints of the Mozambique Channel States there is a strong case for India to increase its footprint in the Mozambique Channel. The Mozambique Channel States sit astride busy ISLs and are vulnerable to ship traffic related oil pollution. Helping them to strengthen their environmental security would constitute an approach centred on those countries' major area of concern. The initiatives embodying livelihood and environment security are aligned with the SAGAR vision and the guiding principles for India - Africa engagement. A full-fledged embassy in Comoros will enable India to enhance its strategic interests. Pursuing the above initiatives with vigour and energy suggest a way forward.

Notes

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