



***INDIA NEEDS TO CONSOLIDATE ITS
CONTROL IN THE WESTERN INDIAN
OCEAN***

BY MICHAEL RUBIN

Michael Rubin (mrubin@aei.org) is director of policy analysis at the Middle East Forum and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

The following is the first in a two-part series on the evolving security architecture in the Indian Ocean and how I2U2 countries (India, Israel, UAE, US) can further security cooperation in the broader Indian Ocean region. It follows a day-long November 2024 workshop conducted by the India and Indian Ocean program at Pacific Forum in partnership with the Hindu American Foundation and StandWithUs.

The I2U2 (India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and United States) partnership, while not a military alliance, is key to security in the Indian Ocean basin. Each partner has an interest in trade, countering radicalism, freedom of navigation, and security. Each also faces mutual threats.

Not all partners are equal in their capacity, however. While each I2U2 member has an interest in trade and security, India has broader capacity in the Indian Ocean region, especially as the United States increasingly hesitates to project power. Too often, however, Washington and New Delhi only focus on Chinese penetration in the eastern Indian Ocean and ignore the Western Indian Ocean and the African littoral states. United States Naval presence in the region is limited. The Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain is focused more on the Persian Gulf, and the US presence in Djibouti focuses more on supply and Africa's interior. The US base in Diego Garcia both prepositions equipment and serves as an airfield for

long range aircraft but is nonetheless limited compared to other countries' India Ocean presence.

Within the eastern and northern Indian Ocean, there is also some Indian presence, but still a small footprint given India's role as the world's most populous country and largest democracy. India directs much of its overseas commercial investment today in the Iranian port of Chabahar. India can do what it interprets to be in its national interest and the logic of the northern corridor is compelling, but Chabahar is a curious choice given the concern this raises with the United States and Israel. While Washington has not felt as strongly about Chabahar since the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, President-elect Trump's Manichaean views toward Iran suggest Chabahar will become an irritant. Regardless of US politics, gambling on an opaque and difficult Iranian commercial environment seems counterproductive, especially if India does not diversify its outreach.

The Indian military maintains small facilities on Madagascar, the Seychelles, and Oman and, on Feb. 29, 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mauritius Premier Pravind Jugnauth inaugurated an airstrip at Agaléga, about 2,000 miles southwest of India. While Modi builds infrastructure on Indian Ocean islands, though, he is essentially catching up as his predecessors were for too long complacent. It is still too little, too late, especially as China seeks to expand its footprint.

In December 2017, China won a 99-year lease over the Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and China's interest in Gwadar, Pakistan, one of the original pearls in Beijing's string, is more strategic than commercial. Diplomats might emphasize the trade potential and speak about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), but the fact remains that this is a poor cover for China's military ambition, especially given the money-losing reality of CPEC for Pakistan. Gwadar and Hambantota might be unofficial bases, but Beijing increasing dispenses with the pretense of commercial cover, hence the 2017 establishment of its first official overseas naval base in Djibouti. China's military presence in the Mediterranean is limited and so, by process of elimination, the Djibouti base reflects a desire by China to project power across the northern and western Indian ocean basin. Chinese

commercial interests in Somalia and its presence in Kenya and Tanzania suggest a desire to encircle the Indian Ocean. The United States recognizes this which is why President Joe Biden used his last overseas trip as president to visit Angola and highlight the Lobito corridor, the revitalization of an old railway that US strategists hope will reorient trade from China and the Indian Ocean basin to the Atlantic Ocean and the West.

China is not the only challenge India faces in the Indian Ocean Basin; there is Pakistan as well. In 2017, insurgency erupted in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado as locals grew disenchanted with Maputo's corrupt rule and lack of development, even as Mozambique sought to exploit the region's offshore gas. This culminated in 2020 with the Islamic State taking over the province, leading to Rwandan intervention to drive the insurgents into the bush. In 2022, I interviewed Islamic State prisoners captured by the Rwandans and inspected the material they carried. Many had electronics and literature shipped from Karachi to Mombasa or Dar-es-Salaam. While Rwanda saved the day in Mozambique, the danger of the Islamic State in Africa is real for India. In its original incarnation, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria captured oil fields and grain, both of which were relatively difficult to sell beyond the willingness of corrupt neighbors like Turkey. The gold, copper, and uranium in Congolese mines, however, would be easier to transport and fund further radicalism. Just as Hezbollah's economic presence in Africa enabled terrorism in the Middle East, a Pakistan-Islamic State partnership in Africa could fund Pakistan-sponsored terrorists in Kashmir, Punjab, and elsewhere in the region.

Regardless, with Al Shabaab gaining ground in Somalia and establishing operational capability in Kenya, and then with the Islamic State threatening Mozambique, India has a strategic challenge on its hands.

The Turkish threat is also real. Turkey is effectively a colonial power. It is the largest investor in Mogadishu, controls the airport, and staffs a port. It also trains an elite military force that it increasingly uses as mercenaries for its own agenda rather than a force

against Al Shabaab. Given Turkey's turn toward radical Islamism and its diplomatic quest for leadership of the global Muslim community, India should be wary of Turkey's presence in the Indian Ocean basin, especially given Turkey's growing military partnership with and sales to Pakistan. Turkey may not be able to compete with India head on, but a failure of India to engage will simply allow Turkey a foothold in the Western Indian Ocean by default.

While China and Turkey behave as colonial powers, India's experience at the hands of the British, Dutch, Portuguese, and Persians as well as its traditional leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement give New Delhi a sensitivity China or, for that matter, the United States lack. India should be self-assured enough that the projection of its power would be both welcome and symbiotic.

While India is correct to seek military bases on Indian Ocean islands, it must also begin to prioritize increasing its influence on the African mainland. Here, it has a natural advantage given its traditional diaspora community in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, and the positive associations Indian businesses have on the continent. China may invest more, but Africans resent how China exploits resources and ships raw material abroad, often utilizing their own workers who do not interact socially or economically with nearby communities. Indians, on the other hand, invest where they work and help build the broader economy.

India could easily work with Mozambique to build a base in Cabo Delgado, perhaps in Palma or Pemba, to deny that hydrocarbon-rich sector permanently to the Chinese or Pakistan-backed terror groups. India should also consider the United Arab Emirates-refurbished port of Berbera for its own strategic and commercial regions. Berbera now surpasses Mombasa in traffic and is a deep water port capable of accommodating Indian cargo and war ships. Berbera's airfield, which once served as an emergency landing strip for NASA's space shuttle, is one of Africa's longest, capable of accommodating both Indian commercial and military traffic.

An Indian presence in Somaliland would also further India's commercial interests in other ways. In September 2023, the I2U2 unveiled the India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEEC). Importantly, this bypassed Iran. While Washington and Jerusalem interpret Houthi attacks on shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb on the Iranian-backed Yemeni group's ideological animosity toward Israel and sympathy toward Hamas, Indian officials are right to point out Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps likely have an alternate motivation: As IMEEC bypasses Iran and the Revolutionary Guards control logistics and transportation across the country, undermining alternative routes can bolster Iran's long-term financial interests.

India should not accept blackmail. A base at Berbera, whether Indian, American, Emirati or joint, could better secure maritime traffic. It takes at least 4,000 men to crew a Nimitz class aircraft carrier; it takes four to crew an Osprey, an aircraft better capable of reacting rapidly to pirates and Houthis.

The Indian Ocean Basin is going to be an economic engine for trade and security in the 21st century. New Delhi must choose: If China or other revisionist states dominate the region, the impact on trade and Indian security will be far different than if India itself is the dominant power. For too long, India has been inward looking. As threats mount against each of the I2U2, it is essential that India step up to its true leadership role.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.