

India and Britain in the Western Indian Ocean

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Summary

Britain has been the missing link in India's expansive engagement with key actors in the Indo-Pacific. Given the deep historic association between the navies of the two countries and the shared interests in a stable global maritime order, Delhi and London can quickly construct an ambitious agenda for regional security cooperation in various sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific, especially in the Western Indian Ocean. Overcoming their differences on subcontinental issues will pave the way for long-term maritime partnership between the two nations.

Maritime security cooperation has emerged as an important element of India's framework of great power relations. Missing in this framework, however, is a credible maritime engagement with the United Kingdom. The British preoccupation with Brexit, London's apparent lack of empathy to Delhi's concerns on Kashmir and Pakistan sponsored terrorism and India's unwillingness to devote extra-energies to revamp the ties with Britain seemed to limit the possibilities to realise the full potential of bilateral cooperation in the maritime domain.

Strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain has emerged as a critical pillar in India's expansive relationship with the United States. Until recently, India seemed more intent on keeping America at arms-length in its maritime domain. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's security cooperation with the US, including in the maritime domain have rapidly expanded. Under Modi, India has shed the earlier inhibitions about building a coalition of maritime democracies and has openly embraced the notion of the Indo-Pacific, albeit with its own interpretation of the concept and defining its own regional strategy.

The biggest advance in India's strategic maritime cooperation under Modi has been with France. If India saw the rivalry between US and the Soviet Union in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War a threat to regional security, it largely dismissed the significant naval presence of France as a legacy from the colonial era and wished to have little to do with it. Even as India expanded the naval engagement with the Western powers after the Cold War, there was little sense in Delhi of the strategic possibilities for maritime and naval cooperation with France.

Delhi's lukewarm approach to Paris changed during the visit of President Emmanuel Macron to India in 2018. During the visit, the two leaders unveiled a grand vision for bilateral and plurilateral strategic cooperation in the Indian Ocean. The two sides also signed an agreement on mutual logistical support. France was only the second country (after the US) that India signed the so-called LEMOA (Logistical Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) that allows access to each other's military facilities and mutual support in such areas as refuelling and replenishment. At the end of 2019, Macron visited the French territory of Reunion Island in the South Western Indian Ocean and invited Delhi to join its efforts in promoting peace, security and prosperity in the littoral.

For France this is a big departure from its tradition of maintaining its primacy in the South Western Indian Ocean. For India the expansive collaboration with France is a break from its long-standing aversion to regional security cooperation with former colonial powers. This important discontinuity also allows India to rethink the prospects for maritime cooperation with Britain.

Unlike France, Britain has an intimate history of naval relationship with India. Independent India's navy grew as part of the burden-sharing arrangements with the Royal Navy and was an important source of early Indian naval procurement. India also used to take part in Commonwealth naval exercises in the Indian Ocean in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, as India turned inward and adopted military isolationism as part of its foreign policy of non-alignment, India's engagement with Britain became limited to arms acquisition.

Following the Cold War, Britain has not figured prominently in India's renewed military diplomacy. They have sustained annual naval exercises called Konkan for some years but these are fairly low key. India's relations with Britain have been marred by continuing differences over Afghanistan and Pakistan. Delhi is troubled by the perception of a British tilt towards Pakistan on regional issues.

If India and Britain look beyond these differences, it is possible to imagine a more robust maritime engagement. Britain paying renewed attention to its role in the maritime domain east of Suez and wants to be part of the new dynamic emerging in the Indo-Pacific. Although Britain never fully withdrew from the region at the turn of the 1970s, the burden of securing eastern Indian Ocean and the Pacific was largely left to the US that replaced the UK as the dominant naval power in the world's oceans.

Whether it will eventually withdraw from the European Union or not, Britain is eager to enhance its role in the Indian and Pacific Oceans either under the framework of "[Global Britain](#)" or in partnership with the European powers, bilaterally or collectively under the European Union framework. Building on its historic ties with the Gulf countries, Britain is expanding its naval presence in the Gulf. Meanwhile, India's own security stakes in the Gulf are rapidly rising amidst the renewed turbulence in the region.

If Delhi and London agree to deepen their [security cooperation](#) in the Western Indian Ocean, three immediate possibilities present themselves.

The first is to raise the level of the bilateral Konkan naval exercises. The second is to sign an agreement on mutual logistics support that will allow Delhi to access Britain's military facilities in the Western Indian Ocean and promote interoperability between the two navies. The last is to coordinate their bilateral naval activities in the Western Indian Ocean as well as promote maritime multilateralism in the Indian Ocean. All these potential areas of [engagement](#) appeared to have figured in the discussions between the British Vice Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Tim Fraser, to India in October 2019.

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