

# India - A Rising Power in East African Waters

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

**India currently has no military bases in Africa but has stepped up its drive to build strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean. This includes the construction of a listening post on Madagascar and radar stations on the Seychelles and Mauritius. Due to domestic opposition in the Seychelles and Mauritius, construction of bases or military installations have been halted. Meanwhile, New Delhi has approved and is negotiating a number of basing agreements with foreign state actors present in Africa. As India has risen as a major economic and military power, it seeks to ensure three key strategic interests: (1) reclaiming the maritime security space of the British Raj, (2) securing sea lines of communications (SLOCs), and (3) balancing China's rising influence. The drive to regain India's traditional security role in Africa is reinforced by the fact that an Indian diaspora of about three million is living in the East African countries. Given India's strategic interests and growing capabilities, it may be expected that its security role in Africa will increase, especially in and around East African waters.**

## **RECLAIMING THE MARITIME SPACE OF THE BRITISH RAJ**

The administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants India to become 'a leading power', a state with a seat at the high table of global politics and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. India's great power ambition is underpinned by the fastest gross domestic product (GDP) growth among the major economies, about 7 per cent per year, as well as rising military expenditures, currently the fifth largest in the world (about the same as Russia's).

Since the late 1990s, India has invested large resources

in its armed forces and allocated a growing share of its defence budget to the navy. As its economy has globalised, India has been gradually shifting from being primarily a land power to becoming a sea power as well, thus investing heavily in a 'blue-water navy'. It has adopted plans to establish three aircraft carrier groups, including dozens of new warships, submarines, and maritime aircraft. The modernisation effort has been hampered by delays and cost overruns. Nevertheless, its navy has for example inducted a refurbished Russian-made aircraft carrier, nuclear-powered submarines, large warships, and anti-submarine aircraft. In 2018, India became one of a handful of states with a 'nuclear triad'; that is, air-, land-, and sea-based nuclear weapons forces.

As a part of India's rise, New Delhi has growing ambitions in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, India has begun to employ the old British metaphor 'from Aden to Malacca', and expanded the definition of its neighbourhood to encompass all of the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi has also promulgated ambitious naval strategies in accordance with the British Raj's historical sphere of interest. The British Raj was the British Crown's period of rule – between 1858 and 1947 – on the Indian subcontinent. During British rule, India dominated the Indian Ocean region, largely thanks to sea power; the Indian Ocean contains a maritime space that stretches from the Persian Gulf in the north to Antarctica in the south, from East Africa in the west to South-east Asia in the east.

To proceed with these aims, New Delhi has among other things established a joint military command on the Andaman and Nicobar islands, near the Malacca Strait, as well as gained access to the Changi naval base, in Singapore, and signed agreements related to Duqm, in

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Oman – both located close to important maritime choke points.

The return of the security perimeters of the British Raj implies that East African islands and littoral states are becoming more important to India's security policy.

### **SECURING SEA LINES OF COMMUNICATIONS**

Since India started to open up its insulated economy in the early 1990s, trade with the outside world has boomed. Trade liberalisation has made India into one of the world's largest economies and at the same time heavily dependent on imports of strategic commodities, such as oil and gas, from abroad. India's foreign trade has increased to over 40 per cent of GDP and is to a large extent transported through the Indian Ocean. The growing dependency on maritime trade has in turn made India vulnerable to disruptions at sea.

A key Indian interest is thus to ensure freedom of navigation; that is, to keep SLOCs and narrow straits open. The Indian navy's strategy defines East Africa and its maritime choke points – the Bab al-Mandab strait, the Mozambique Channel, the Suez Canal, and the Cape of Good Hope – as primary maritime interests. West Africa is defined as an area of secondary interest.

Africa is also an important source of oil, gas, diamonds, and gold, and is a growing market for manufactured goods. India's interest in securing maritime trade between the two continents is thus one key factor pushing India to strengthen its security role in Africa.

### **BALANCING CHINA**

As historic and competing rivals, India has an interest in balancing China's growing economic and military influence in the Indo-Pacific and East Africa. Similar to India, China's growing trade with Africa, the Middle East and Europe has made it heavily dependent on the shipping lanes in the Indo-Pacific and through the straits of Malacca, Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz. Partly due to its need to ensure economic security, China is also building a blue-water fleet; deploying its navy in the Indian Ocean more frequently; deepening defence ties with states in the Indo-Pacific region; building ports in strategic locations; and has already opened its first overseas base, in Djibouti, close to Bab al-Mandab.

China's very attempts to solve a trade-related security dilemma are at the same time creating another one for India. Relations between China and India since the war of 1962 have often been conflictual. Their enmity was long centred on the disputed land border and India's support of the Tibetan exile government as well as China's backing of Pakistan.

India's answer to China's growing economic, military, and political roles is thus to reclaim the Indian Ocean as 'India's Ocean'. This is done through the build-up of a modern blue-water fleet and the construction of strategic port infrastructure. India has followed in China's footsteps by building port infrastructure near choke points, for example in Chabahar (Iran), located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and just 70 kilometres from the Chinese port in Gwadar (Pakistan). India has also deepened its defence cooperation with friendly countries, and constructed radar surveillance networks in the Western Indian Ocean.

### **MILITARY PRESENCE**

In order to reclaim the strategic space of the British Raj, secure SLOCs, and balance China, India has tried to deepen its military presence in the Western Indian Ocean. The drive to regain India's traditional security role in Africa is reinforced by the fact that an Indian diaspora of about three million has settled in East African countries. Although it currently does not have any military bases there, it is nevertheless engaged in a number of other activities that are designed to strengthen its military presence. These activities are discussed in further detail below.

#### **A radar surveillance network in the Western Indian Ocean**

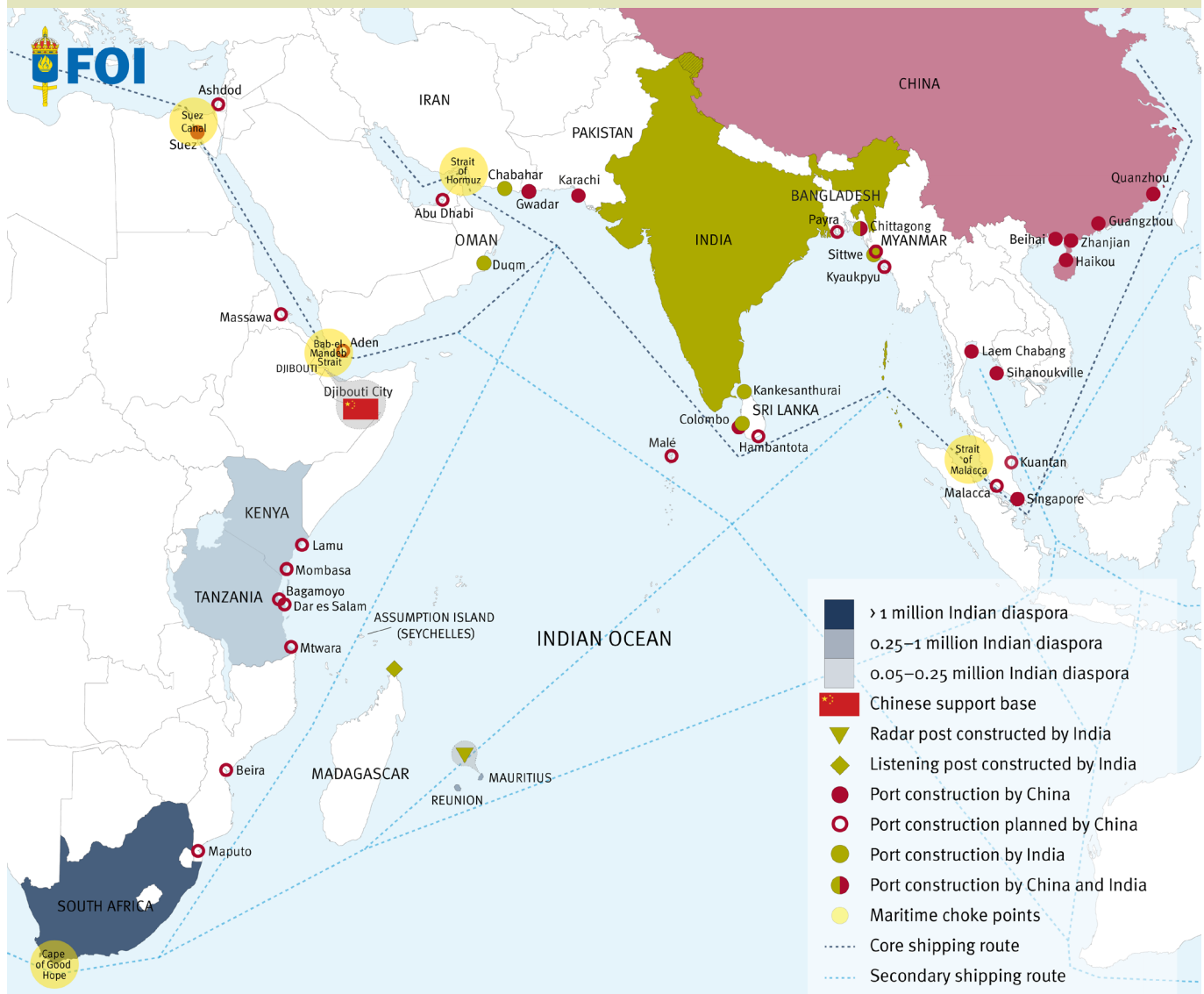
New Delhi has established a radar surveillance network in the Western Indian Ocean by building stations on African islands and linking them to India. In 2007, India constructed a listening post in northern Madagascar, reportedly its first on foreign soil. Two years later, India reached agreement with Mauritius on installation of eight radars on four islands. By 2011, the radars in Mauritius had been set up and an agreement on data-sharing had been inaugurated. By 2016, India had also built six radar stations on five different islands in the Seychelles.

Through the establishment of the radar network, India has improved its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities regarding crucial SLOCs, especially the Mozambique Channel, in the Western Indian Ocean. Through this effort, India is starting to reclaim the maritime strategic space of the Raj, while improving its surveillance of Chinese maritime movements.

#### **A future base in the Seychelles?**

Since Modi became prime minister in 2014, India has stepped up its drive to build strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean. In 2015, India and the Seychelles signed an agreement for the development of defence facilities on Assumption, an outlying island, but close

## Assessment of India's military presence and strategic interests in Africa



Sources: FOI, based on Government of India (2018), The Diplomat (2018), Indian Express (2007), India's Ministry of External Affairs (2017), Indian Navy (2015), Merics (2018), Council on Foreign Relations (2016), Rodrigue (2016), High Commission of India, Port Louis, Mauritius (2009).

to the shipping lanes in the Mozambique Channel. However, environmental concerns and questions related to sovereignty led the Seychellois parliament to halt a ratification of the agreement.

In 2018, the two states adopted, in secret, a revised agreement that was planned to last for twenty years, and which included an option for renewal every ten years. The agreement allows India to construct berthing facilities for ships; a runway; air and maritime control rooms; as well as communications installations. The secret agreement was leaked, however, and caused domestic resistance. The leading Seychellois opposition party, which holds a majority of the seats in the parliament, began to oppose

ratification of the agreement. As a result, the possible establishment of an Indian base in the Seychelles is currently on hold.

### A future base in Mauritius?

In 2015, India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Mauritius to build strategic infrastructure on the Agaléga Islands, northeast of Madagascar. The MoU seems reminiscent of the agreement with the Seychelles about Assumption Island; India reportedly plans to develop a berthing facility and improve a runway.

In October 2018, the prime minister of Mauritius (as well as Indian analysts) indicated that the process of negotiation regarding an Indian infrastructure on



the Agaléga islands was proceeding. Yet, domestic constituencies in Mauritius opposed that foreign powers established bases in the country, and it remains to be seen if India will establish a proper military base in the country, or not.

#### **Base agreements with the US, France, Russia and Japan**

In the past few years, the Modi administration has signed base agreements with a number of states in the Indo-Pacific (the US, France, Oman, and Singapore). India is reportedly also negotiating agreements with Russia and Japan.

India has approved defence logistics agreements with the US and France that enable the use of each other's military bases. In 2016, India and the US signed a so-called logistics agreement '... that establishes basic terms, conditions, and procedures for reciprocal provision of logistic support, supplies, and services'. Through the deal, India's military may get access to US bases such as the one in Djibouti, for example for the resupplying and refurbishing of ships and aircraft during joint exercises, humanitarian relief efforts, and port visits.

In 2018, India and France signed a similar agreement on 'reciprocal logistics support'; Modi described it '... as a golden step in the history of our close defence cooperation'. The agreement could enable future Indian access to France's naval bases in the Indian Ocean, including in Africa, for example Réunion and Djibouti.

India is also negotiating a base agreement with Japan. This could allow India to obtain access to the Japanese base in Djibouti.

#### **LOOKING AHEAD**

The outcome of India's striving to establish a military bases and installation has so far been rather modest, however, in spite of its great ambitions. Nevertheless, as India rises and turns to the sea, the need for naval bases will likely increase. It aims to use its blue-water fleet to reclaim the maritime strategic space of the British Raj, protect SLOCs and balance China. To do all of these things, the future fleet would probably also require naval bases and berthing rights in the Indian Ocean region, including in East Africa.

India appears to be adopting a strategy reminiscent of and in response to China's, which is to build and attain

access to ports and acquire military bases in the Indo-Pacific region. India is preparing for a possible future when Chinese-constructed ports have evolved into de facto military 'pearls', by laying the ground for 'flowers' of its own. Given the changing strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific, India's attempts to build ports, military bases, and other installations in the Western Indian Ocean should not come as a surprise to anyone.

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