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India's Island Diplomacy

**The cases of the Maldives, Madagascar, and
Mauritius**

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Introduction

India has a series of multifaceted strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) based on its geographical location, its historical ties with regional actors, and overarching national and regional security concerns. The intent to actively protect national interests in the region has emerged as an increasingly crucial component of India's wider diplomatic and strategic engagement in the IOR under the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Over the course of the 21st century, India has come to face a strategic environment in the region that is increasingly defined by China's growing economic but also wider naval strategic presence. The IOR has thus emerged as another space in which the underlying issues in the China-India relationship, shaped primarily by border conflicts and China's relationship with Pakistan, has come to play out.

With a vast coastline of over 7,500 kilometers and several strategically positioned islands and archipelagos, most notably the Lakshadweep archipelago and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India has been a major regional stakeholder in the development of security and governance regimes in the Indian Ocean since independence. Its proximity to and dependence on major regional shipping lanes, including the Straits of Malacca, Palk, and Balb al-Mandab, makes a continued access and navigability of these sea lanes of communication a key strategic interest for India. New Delhi's exposure to maritime supply chain vulnerability is specifically pronounced in the energy sector: India imported almost 85% of its crude oil as of 2020-2021, most of which originates in the Persian Gulf and is transported to India via sea (Sharma, 2023). Further, the IOR is home to abundant natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and fisheries. Ensuring uninterrupted access to these resources while promoting trade and investment and expanding economic cooperation are central to India's engagement with the wider IOR.

The growing economic and strategic presence of the Chinese has complicated India's historical understanding of the Indian Ocean as "*India's Ocean*", a space in which India remains an outsized and near-hegemonic actor (Scott, 2015). The Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) has served as a framework through which China has expanded its presence in the IOR by funding ostensible infrastructure investments in a region desperately dependent on the influx of more foreign capital. Some of these investments have focused on the construction and expansion of ports that India fears could be transformed into dual-use assets in the future, tying into broader Indian concerns regarding China's alleged 'debt-trap diplomacy' in South Asia. Besides the Indian concerns regarding China, India and other regional actors face non-traditional security challenges, including piracy and illicit trafficking (Srivastava, 2017). Developing maritime security capacities has subsequently remained a key policy priority, both for India and smaller countries in the Indian Ocean

To assert Indian leadership and constrain China's regional presence to some extent, India has significantly ramped up its economic and strategic presence in the IOR in recent years. India has expanded its engagement in maritime security cooperation, joint patrols, and information-sharing initiatives to combat threats and promote regional security collaboration. Cultural diplomacy has played a key role in structuring India's wider engagement, with India

launching several initiatives that have sought to highlight the historical-cultural links between the IOR and the Indian subcontinent and the role of Indian diaspora communities while advocating for improved people-to-people ties and a greater Indian economic presence in the IOR, especially via infrastructure investments. Island nations in the IOR have simultaneously not been without agency in the overarching contest for influence between China and India. For smaller countries, Beijing and New Delhi striving for influence allows island nations to hedge between the two to maximize developmental outcomes. Complex relations with India also contribute to idiosyncratic developments in individual countries that warrant further attention to understand the dynamics shaping strategic processes in the IOR today.

This paper studies the progress and challenges of India's engagement with three key littoral Indian Ocean States: the Maldives, Madagascar, and Mauritius. After briefly elaborating on China's emerging role in the IOR, the paper summarizes the general framework India has employed under Prime Minister Modi in its interaction with the region. The paper then examines how this blueprint has been applied in the three case study countries, what specific local contexts shape the effectiveness of this engagement until now, and what limitations remain in the respective bilateral relationships. The paper finds that although India's growing diplomatic presence has created some positive outcomes, the Indian presence is partially contentious and shaped by a variety of factors that make developments contingent on specific local contexts. Carefully navigating these contexts and respective concerns will be paramount in order to ensure India's long-term role as an alternative to China.

China's emerging role in the Indian Ocean

The perhaps most transformative development in the regional security architecture in the Indian Ocean in the 21st century is the growing naval presence and economic importance of China. China already possesses one naval base in Djibouti, which was constructed to promote Chinese responsiveness to piracy around the Gulf of Aden in the late 2000s (Tanchum, 2021). While expanding the overall size of its naval forces, China has also steadily expanded its presence in the IOR through a growing number of naval deployments, the holding of military exercises in the region (Baruah, 2022), and a growing subsurface presence around major maritime chokepoints (Panneerselvam, 2022). As part of the BRI, China has invested heavily into the construction of physical infrastructure, including ports that lie near major maritime chokepoints (Mishra, 2021). In India, policymakers are suspicious of China's provision of mostly untransparent loan deals which, the narrative suggests, could be used to exert geopolitical leverage over domestic politics and build up a long-term military presence in the region (Mukherjee, 2020). Concerns regarding China's growing economic and naval presence have also concerned policymakers in other larger Indian Ocean stakeholder countries, including in the United States (White, 2020).

As mentioned above, India has perceived this development as an incursion into a geographical and political space New Delhi has long conceived of as its own sphere of influence. As such, the entry of a new actor that already competes with India elsewhere manifests a challenge to its strategic objectives. A growing economic and naval presence of China in the region is interpreted by policymakers in New Delhi as a potential long-term threat to the security of crucial sea lines of communication on which India depends for the import of

goods, an anxiety further exacerbated by China's mostly unrecorded subsurface presence and activities throughout the IOR (Singh, 2022). In India, deep suspicions also remain regarding the supposedly economic nature of the BRI: rather, Chinese investments are seen as directly aiming to establish a naval forward presence in the IOR that could be leveraged in the case of conflict with India. Many in India suspect China to aim to establish a 'string of pearls' of ports in the Indian Ocean that could restrict Indian navigability and market access in times of conflict (Ashraf, 2017). If China is indeed viewed as seeking to build a 'string of pearls' of potentially militarized maritime/naval assets, the geography and policy posturing vis-à-vis Chinese investments of regional island nations is of crucial importance to India. These countries serve as major maritime connectivity nodes. As such, they have emerged as countries India has focused its diplomatic outreach on.

India's diplomatic engagement with the IOR under Modi

While India's security calculations toward the IOR have been reshaped by a growing presence of Chinese investments and naval assets, non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, illicit trafficking, and climate change continue to be relevant in shaping India's aims. Crucially, these non-traditional challenges are immediate policy issues for smaller island countries. As such, most of the engagement has not openly focused on containing China but on addressing the security concerns of island countries in the IOR. There is a notable overlap in boosting the capacities of island nations to respond to traditional and non-traditional threats, specifically in regard to boosting maritime domain awareness capacities, joint patrolling, and information sharing.

India's aspirations surrounding a more proactive role in the IOR are situated in a complex history that has also led to many island countries being suspicious of India's strategic ambitions. In the past, Indian administrations have repeatedly asserted their perception of the Indian Ocean as a sphere of influence by intervening militarily. Interventions have occurred in Mauritius in 1983, the Maldives in 1988, and Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990. These interventions and India's self-proclaimed regional leadership role have historically contributed to a conception in some island nations of India as an overbearing neighbor with hegemonic aspirations that aims to construct regional order on unilateral terms (Moorthy, 2020). For some, China is viewed as an alternative that brings less historical baggage and is willing to provide infrastructure investment on favorable terms for the receiving country. Today, Indian diplomacy thus faces the challenge of aiming to affirm India's role without reinforcing the perceptions informing regional distrust toward India while competing with a China that allows smaller countries to hedge their bets.

Against this larger backdrop, engagement with island countries in the Indian Ocean has become a discursive cornerstone of the Modi's government foreign policy approach toward the region. The IOR was made part of Modi's 'neighborhood first' policy, which seeks to prioritize regional engagement within South Asia and reaffirm India's role in the region (Sidhu & Godbole, 2015). The Modi government has sought to strengthen bilateral and regional ties through initiatives focused on trade, connectivity, defense cooperation, cultural exchanges, and capacity-building. As part of this, India has launched the "SAGAR" (Security and Growth for

All in the Region) doctrine, which stresses the importance of fostering peace, stability, and collective prosperity in the IOR (Schöttli, 2019). Indian governmental discourse has framed SAGAR as linked to other continental connectivity initiatives launched by the Modi government, including the International North-South Transport Corridor and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. The rhetoric of the Modi administration vis-à-vis the region has mainly emphasized India's role as a facilitator of regional connectivity and development to avoid a return to a more hegemonic foreign policy discourse and logic.

The emphasis on a series of cultural diplomacy frameworks focused on facilitating people-to-people contact is consistent with this non-confrontational approach. Cultural exchanges and festivals promoting the varied cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent have served as a key platform on which Indian artists, musicians, and performers can interact with the regional populations (High Commission of India, Mauritius, n.d.). Another significant aspect of India's cultural diplomacy is the promotion of yoga, Ayurveda, and traditional medicine, for which government authorities have organized a range of workshops, wellness programs, and training sessions in Indian Ocean countries. Notably, these initiatives seek to leverage the partially significant Indian and South Asian presence in the countries in the IOR.

India's engagement with the region under Modi is situated in a broader process of narrative-building in which India emphasizes the continuity of cultural, economic, and social exchanges between the subcontinent and the islands that have occurred for centuries. These connections are viewed as forming the basis for constructive bilateral ties and joint initiatives in various sectors. Indian initiatives have, for example, promoted heritage tourism to attract visitors from Indian Ocean Island nations to historical sites in India such as ancient temples, forts, and archaeological sites that hold cultural and historical significance for both India and the island nations (High Commission of India, Mauritius, n.d.). Further, India has sought to use Indian diaspora communities in these countries, many of which maintain strong ties with their ancestral homeland, as a cultural bridge with the island countries (The Hindu, 2021). As part of this community-based approach, Indian cooperation has promoted the teaching and learning of Indian languages, such as Hindi and Tamil. This forms part of a broader attempt to enhance the familiarization of Indian Ocean Island countries with components of historical and contemporary Indian culture.

Educational exchanges and scholarships have come to occupy a key place in the Indian soft power strategy surrounding cultural engagement. India has offered scholarships and educational opportunities to students from Indian Ocean countries, allowing them to pursue higher education in India. Much of this has been channeled via the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, which provides scholarships and exchanges in areas such as education, arts, and sports (ITEC, 2022). These initiatives seek to contribute to the development of human capital, build long-term relationships, and create a network of future political stakeholders in the region with deep links in and appreciation for India. India also supports capacity-building in administrative and bureaucratic contexts. India-supported programs encompass various sectors such as education, healthcare, agriculture, and skill development. As part of the ITEC program, for instance, training is provided to individuals from Indian Ocean countries in areas such as technology, management, and public administration. Here too, the overt emphasis is on cooperation rather than an imposition of Indian economic or strategic objectives.

While soft power evidently occupies a central role in India's broader strategy toward the region, security cooperation is not wholly absent from India's regional engagement. Frameworks for security and defense cooperation have primarily emphasized the bolstering of maritime capacities for littoral States. One of the key initiatives taken by India is the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which aims to promote maritime cooperation, regional security, and information sharing among Indian Ocean littoral countries (The Hindu, 2022). The IONS provides a platform for dialogue, coordination, and capacity-building in areas such as maritime domain awareness, disaster response, and counter-piracy operations. Notably, the IONS is explicitly framed as a framework for responding to non-traditional security challenges. India has also strengthened its bilateral defense ties with Indian Ocean countries through various initiatives. As will be discussed below, India has increasingly invested efforts into defense dialogues, joint military exercises, and naval patrols with countries such as the Maldives, Madagascar, and Mauritius. These activities aim to enhance mutual trust and interoperability, between the national armed forces and law enforcement agencies.

Frameworks for capacity-building and intelligence sharing have been key components of the security component of the recent engagement strategy. The Indian government has provided training and scholarships for military personnel from littoral countries focused on maritime security, counterterrorism, and disaster response. India has also extended lines of credit to these countries for the procurement of defense equipment and infrastructure development related to defense needs (Roy-Chaudhury, 2017). Further, India has promoted engagement in initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) to combat piracy, maritime terrorism, and other security threats in the region. India has contributed to joint patrols, surveillance, and information-sharing efforts to maintain maritime domain awareness and secure sea lines of communication by establishing coastal radar systems and expanding the network of Automatic Identification System (AIS) to track vessels. These measures aim to improve the surveillance and response capabilities of Indian Ocean countries in the face of mostly non-traditional security challenges.

India has also sought to counter the infrastructure-focused component of the BRI by providing investment for infrastructure itself. Examples include the construction of ports, airports, roads, and railways. For instance, India has been involved in the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran, which provides an alternative route for trade with Afghanistan, Central Asia, and beyond (Aliasgary & Ekstrom, 2021). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, India has invested in infrastructure projects and has promised to increase private and public sector investment as Sri Lanka seeks to diversify from Chinese loans (Nikkei Asia, 2023). These initiatives aim to boost connectivity but are also designed to contribute to the economic development of the host nations and present an alternative to Chinese infrastructure investments.

The initiatives India has pursued so far imply a distinct signaling and power projection element. India's engagement with the island nations remains influenced by the desire to project its influence and strengthen its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, reinforcing Indian control at a time when China's growing presence questions some of the architectural tenets of the present order. There is a clear ambition to avoid a conception in littoral States of India as an overbearing and imposing actor. This is and will remain a tightrope to walk.

India's diplomatic engagement in the Maldives, Madagascar, and Mauritius

▪ *The Maldives*

India and the Maldives have a long history of cultural, economic, and political ties that have shaped the bilateral relationship since both countries have gained independence. Historically, Maldivian society has been strongly influenced by Indian culture, language, and religion. Today, areas of cooperation include trade, tourism, defense, and development assistance. However, perceptions of overextended Indian influence and interference have contributed to an increasingly complicated relationship in the past decades.

The Maldives has faced a range of domestic crises throughout the 2010s, starting with a series of eventually escalating protests that led to the resignation of pro-Indian President Mohamed Nasheed in 2012. His successor Abdulla Yameen pushed for closer relations with China, leading to the signing of a bilateral free trade agreement and the inking of multiple investment agreements as part of the BRI (Macan-Markar, 2023). Following a range of controversial moves, Yameen declared a state of emergency in the country, leading Nasheed to demand an Indian intervention in the Maldives to restore the rule of law (Rasheed, 2018). Yameen was succeeded in 2018 by Ibrahim Mohamed Solih from the MDP (Maldivian Democratic Party), which Nasheed also belonged to. Since then, relations between India and the Maldives have normalized again. Over time, however, Yameen's party, the Progressive Party of Maldives, has launched the so-called 'India Out' campaign, lobbying for more limitations on Indian influence while welcoming a greater Chinese presence to balance India's role in domestic politics (Shivamurthy, 2022). In the Maldives, the roles of China and India have become key factors in internal political processes.

Critics of the relationship have lamented India's military presence in and around the Maldives, the lack of transparency in bilateral agreements, and decisions regarding the extent of Indian influence over Maldivian security forces, including the police and the coastguard (Didi, 2022). 'India out' slogans have been of continued importance and have been supported by some political parties, some traditional and non-traditional news outlets and, it is suspected, Chinese investors (Shivamurthy, 2022). The frequent politicization of the bilateral relationship, still shaped by the memory and impact of India's intervention in the country in 1988, thus continues to be a major factor in influencing Maldivian perceptions and the perceived appeal of China as a balancer against Indian influence.

India has sought to emerge as a more significant economic stakeholder in the country to contribute to more positive perceptions of Indian influence. India has sought to boost national development through various infrastructure projects and economic initiatives, especially surrounding the development of tourism infrastructure, including airports, harbors, and resorts (Al Jazeera, 2020). The development of the Addu City airport is a notable example of the Indian private sector's contribution to the Maldivian tourism industry (PSM News, 2023). Furthermore, India has provided financial assistance and concessional loans to support the Maldivian economy. Development assistance from India has focused on sectors such as healthcare, education, fisheries, and renewable energy. These initiatives are framed as seeking to promote sustainable development and improve the well-being of the Maldivian people in tacit opposition to the elite-focused investment provided by China.

India remains a key security partner in the build-up and maintenance of the Maldives' maritime security capacities. For the Maldives, trilateral security cooperation with India and Sri Lanka is crucial for the response to a range of non-traditional security challenges, including illicit trafficking, piracy, and the unregulated exploitation of fishing grounds (Didi, 2022). Both countries have expressed their continued commitment to collaborate on security and defense, with India handing over a fast patrol vessel and a landing craft to the Maldives, and the two countries jointly laying the foundation for a naval dockyard for the Maldives National Defense Force in Ekatha (Pandit, 2023). During a visit to the Maldives in May 2023 by Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, the bilateral security relationship was once again a topic of discussion (Financial Express, 2023), with a joint statement following the meeting reaffirming the importance of a rules-based order and a shared commitment to maintaining stability in the region (Pandit, 2023). Since the election of Solih, the Maldives has entrenched itself in an openly pro-India position that has reinforced India as one of the key stakeholders in providing capacity-building functions to the country, especially in the maritime domain.

Despite the return to normality in the bilateral relationship under the Solih administration, the India-Maldives ties remain complex and subject to change, depending on domestic political shifts. China's growing economic and political influence has added a major variable to the equation that provides Maldivian opposition groups with a backer to balance India. While the Solih government has stabilized India's role in the country for the time being, it is clear that 'India out' slogans present a form of discontent that is at least partially rooted in perceptions of Indian interference. Indian policymakers will have to carefully manage these perceptions and pursue an approach that reassures skeptics in the country. Additionally, the political transitions in the Maldives have impacted the continuity of India-Maldives relations. Each change in government brings its own priorities and perspectives, which can lead to significant and relatively sudden shifts in the bilateral dynamics. Lastly, the Maldives' small size and limited resources pose challenges to the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects and economic initiatives. This necessitates careful planning, coordination, and financial sustainability to ensure successful long-term results.

In conclusion, India has been actively involved in the development of the Maldives through economic and infrastructure cooperation while playing a key role in building up (maritime) security capacities in the country. However, challenges and limitations exist, including the role of China, concerns about Indian dominance, and associated domestic polarization that can lead to rapid shifts in policy following the election of a new government. Overcoming these challenges and fostering a balanced and mutually beneficial relationship will require continued dialogue, trust-building, and understanding between the two countries. Large parts of the Maldivian establishment recognize India's role as a key development partner and a regional security provider. It will remain crucial for India to maintain close dialogue and coordination with the political leadership to address any concerns and build trust.

- *Madagascar*

Madagascar has historically existed outside of the immediate strategic purview of India, presenting a different situation when compared to the Maldives. Over the course of the 21st century, India-Madagascar relations have evolved, with India emerging as an important development and investment partner for Madagascar. While bilateral relations were initially established following Madagascar's independence from France in 1960, the relationship between the two countries remained relatively low-key until the late 1990s, when India began to expand its economic and diplomatic engagement in Africa. In recent years, India's engagement with Madagascar has been driven by the growing demand for energy and the need to diversify its sources of energy supply. India has also sought to present itself as an alternative to BRI infrastructure investments provided by China.

India's economic engagement with Madagascar has primarily focused on investments in agriculture, energy, and infrastructure sectors. India has been providing technical assistance, training, and financial support to Madagascar's agricultural sector through the ITEC program while extending lines of credit to Madagascar to promote agricultural production and processing. India's investments in the energy sector in Madagascar have been driven by the aim to secure access to uranium resources and to promote renewable energy sources (The Economic Times, 2011). India's state-owned Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) has a 51% stake in a joint venture with Madagascar's Office des Mines Nationales et des Industries Strategiques (OMNIS) for uranium exploration and mining in Madagascar. India is also involved in developing solar energy projects in Madagascar while investing in the development of physical infrastructure such as the Antananarivo ring road project and the rehabilitation of the Ambatovy port in Madagascar. As part of its provision of development financing, India has extended a line of credit to Madagascar for the construction of a power plant and the upgrading of the country's power transmission and distribution systems (The Financial Express, 2022). Cooperation in the energy sector consequently plays a key role in the bilateral relationship.

The relative absence of complicated historical ties when compared to the Maldives contributes to a greater emphasis on cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges. India's cultural center in Antananarivo offers language classes, yoga, and cultural events and India has been providing scholarships to Malagasy students to study in India. Additionally, the Indian diaspora in Madagascar, most of which have been merchants in the past, has been actively contributing to the economic development of the country and has become a key domestic stakeholder within Madagascar.

As is the case in the Maldives, maritime security cooperation has played a key role in structuring India's bilateral engagement with Madagascar. Defense and security measures have included joint initiatives, capacity-building programs, and defense trade that seeks to both bolster Antananarivo's capacities while providing an alternative for Chinese investments and influence (Parashar, 2021). The first joint patrol was organized in 2019 as the Indian Navy sought to bolster its presence around sea lanes in the western Indian Ocean, with the joint patrol focusing on patrolling Madagascar's exclusive economic zone and the organization of passage exercise. Since then, Madagascar's defense minister has expressed interest in inviting a greater Indian presence to benefit from joint exercises, capacity building measures, and establishment of a semaphore system on the coast (Parashar, 2021). Within India's defense bureaucracy, the 2019 establishment of the Indian Ocean Region Division within the Ministry of External

Affairs has aimed to formalize and improve India's diplomatic presence throughout the wider region, including island nations and territories in the southern Indian Ocean in the diplomatic framework (The Wire, 2019). Such bureaucratic changes and enhanced collaboration with non-traditional partners such as Madagascar signal the significance of the Indian Ocean as an essential strategic theater for India that is critical for its diplomatic, military, and regional engagements (Baruah, 2022).

As is the case in the Maldives, however, domestic political situations remain a key factor shaping the extent and nature of India's role. Indian investments have been instrumental in promoting agricultural productivity, supporting renewable energy development, and enhancing infrastructure connectivity while India's involvement in the uranium mining sector has also helped Madagascar in exploring its mineral potential. The bilateral trade between the two countries has grown steadily, with exports from India to Madagascar reaching north of 350 million US\$ in 2021, compared to 150 million US\$ in 2013 (Trading Economics, 2022). The implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects in Madagascar, however, has been slow due to bureaucratic hurdles and issues related to land acquisition. The COVID-19 pandemic has also negatively affected Indian investment and trade in Madagascar. Madagascar's political instability has also affected India's engagement with the country: the 2009 coup and the political crisis that followed led to a temporary freeze in India's engagement with Madagascar (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014), indicating the effect internal volatility can have on bilateral ties.

In conclusion, India's investments in agriculture, energy, and infrastructure sectors have had a positive impact on Madagascar's economy and development that is generally recognized by both the Malagasy public and elite circles, which have courted Indian investments and partnerships in various sectors. Within the public sphere, the Indian diaspora in Madagascar plays a crucial role in fostering generally positive perceptions of India. However, as with any foreign engagement, there can be occasional concerns about issues such as economic dominance and cultural influence. As is the case in the Maldives, India's win-win narrative surrounding a greater Indian economic presence must be careful not to escalate these concerns. While India's efforts to promote cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges have further strengthened the bilateral relationship, challenges related to infrastructure implementation and political instability persist. Sustaining and deepening the India-Madagascar relationship will require continued efforts in addressing these challenges and exploring new avenues for cooperation.

- *Mauritius*

Mauritius serves as a key maritime hub and plays a crucial role in India's maritime security and trade interests due to its proximity to major shipping lanes. Its location in the more central portion of the southern Indian Ocean furthermore provides strategic advantages for Indian naval operations and surveillance activities, including concerning Chinese naval and submarine operations.

As is the case in the Maldives and Madagascar, development, and infrastructure assistance as well as trade play a key role in shaping Indian strategy towards Mauritius. Mauritius has historically served as an important gateway for Indian businesses to access

African and global markets and bilateral trade has been growing steadily, with India being Mauritius' second-largest trading partner as of 2022, accounting for 9.75% of all national imports (TrendEconomy, 2023). In terms of industry, the trade relations primarily revolve around sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, information technology, and financial services (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.). Further, India has been actively involved in providing development assistance and implementing infrastructure projects in Mauritius that aim to enhance socio-economic development, strengthen institutional capacities, and promote sustainable growth. The extension of lines of credit has been a key policy tool for India to contribute to the construction of road networks, ports, and water supply systems. These projects contribute to the development of critical infrastructure and support Mauritius' efforts to become a regional economic hub.

The Indo-Mauritian diaspora has played a significant role in strengthening the cultural ties between the two countries. The majority of the population in Mauritius traces its roots back to India, which has resulted in a shared cultural heritage and strong familial connections that remain till today. Indian cultural traditions, languages, and festivals continue to be celebrated in Mauritius, and the diaspora actively participates in promoting cultural exchanges between the two countries. This diaspora acts as a bridge, facilitating people-to-people contact and fostering a sense of cultural affinity. This is a notable difference to the Maldives, where Indian cultural influence is at times viewed with suspicion, and Madagascar, where Indian cultural influence is less pronounced. The diasporic element in the contemporary relationship provides India with improved soft power leverage that does not face the same obstacles and complications it does elsewhere in the region.

India's support for Mauritius on the question of the Chagos Archipelago has contributed to close diplomatic relations. India has supported Mauritius' claim to sovereignty over the archipelago, which continues to be held by the United Kingdom and hosts a US military base but is claimed by Mauritius. In 2017, India voted in favor of a Mauritius-backed resolution in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that sought an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legal status of the archipelago (The Wire, 2017). India reiterated diplomatic support for the Mauritian position after the ICJ ruled in 2019 that the UK's continued presence in the Chagos Islands is illegal (Wintour, 2021). India's support for Mauritius' claim to sovereignty is seen as part of its broader policy of strengthening ties with its Indian Ocean neighbors (Revi, 2020) and has contributed to a favorable political climate in the bilateral ties.

As part of this close diplomatic relationship, India and Mauritius have a long-standing security and defense partnership that has played a critical role in bolstering the maritime capacities of Port Louis. In 2021, India's Minister of External Affairs traveled to Mauritius to ink two crucial agreements: the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA), a bilateral free trade agreement, and a security-focused agreement that oversaw the lease of Indian maritime and air military equipment to Mauritius as well as a loan of 100 million US\$ aimed at facilitating Mauritian defense acquisitions from India (Beri, 2021). These agreements come on the back of existing frameworks that have led to close security ties. Since 1974, Indian maritime personnel has been seconded to Mauritius to serve as part of the Mauritian Coast Guard, exemplifying the close security relationship between both countries. Most crucially, Mauritius has given permission to India to construct a naval base on the remote island of Agaléga (Greene, 2021). Recent satellite images and other documents detail progress

on the construction of two naval jetties and a large runway on the island. The strategic outpost would allow India's navy to observe shipping routes around southern Africa, which now account for a significant portion of China's energy imports. The island would also provide a useful location for communications and electronic intelligence facilities, allowing India to enhance its intelligence-gathering capacities in the southern Indian Ocean. These developments speak to the continued strength and endurance of the bilateral security relationship.

The historical and contemporary political and social proximity between India and Mauritius make complications less pronounced when compared to the Maldives and Madagascar. In Mauritius, India enjoys a positive and warm perception among the public that is driven by the role and size of the Indo-Mauritian diaspora. India's development assistance and infrastructure projects have contributed to the positive perception of India in Mauritius. On an elite level, Mauritian political leadership has consistently expressed positive views about India's diplomatic engagement. The longstanding historical, cultural, and economic ties between the two countries have created a sense of shared interests and mutual respect. The continued closeness between both countries is reflected in recent developments, including closer defense cooperation and, most notably, the signing of CECPA in 2021. Some issues, for instance instability and changes in governance in Mauritius, can provide potential complications going forward. Another challenge is the issue of double taxation and tax evasion. The presence of a large number of Indian companies and investments in Mauritius has led to concerns over the misuse of the tax treaty between the two countries, an issue that a protocol to amend the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) has sought to address (Fowler, 2019).

Conclusion: Progress made and the way forward

India's recent diplomatic engagement with the Maldives, Madagascar, and Mauritius has shown significant progress in advancing New Delhi's diplomatic presence. Naturally, the extent and nature of cooperation (as well as limits thereto) are shaped by a variety of factors. Key factors include the presence/absence of Indian military intervention in the past (and the associated perceptions of Indian presence), the domestic politicization of relations with India, the degree to which China is welcomed as a balance to Indian influence, and the role of the Indian diaspora. Despite the progress made over the past years, challenges remain that need to be addressed to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of India's engagement in these countries.

Competition with other external actors, particularly China, poses a significant challenge for India's diplomatic engagement in the Maldives, Madagascar, and Mauritius. China's massive infrastructure investments and financial assistance as part of the BRI have garnered attention and support from these countries to fill extant infrastructure gaps. India, therefore, needs to navigate this competitive landscape and ensure that its engagements are attractive, beneficial, and sizable enough to counterbalance China's influence. In effect, India must remain capable to actively deliver on the win-win rhetoric it has established under the Modi administration. A non-interventionist, multilaterally focused approach will be key to ensuring continued buy-in from local and regional stakeholders.

Balancing development projects with local sensitivities and sustainability concerns is another challenge for India. While development projects are crucial for fostering economic growth and infrastructure development, it is essential to ensure that they align with local aspirations and priorities. Engaging local communities, conducting thorough environmental assessments, and addressing sustainability concerns are essential for the long-term success and acceptance of these projects. India must focus on building trust and partnerships with local stakeholders to ensure that development projects are sustainable and meet the needs of the local population on their terms.

Addressing historical and geopolitical complexities is another significant challenge in India's diplomatic engagement. Historical factors, such as colonial legacies, past relationships, and at times critical perceptions vis-à-vis Indian policy can influence the perceptions and sentiments of these countries towards India. The 'India out' campaign in the Maldives, marks the most obvious epitome of this. Navigating these complexities requires a nuanced understanding of the historical context and a proactive approach to address any historical grievances or geopolitical concerns.

Ensuring inclusive growth and addressing socio-economic disparities is a critical challenge for India's diplomatic engagement. While development projects and investments can contribute to economic growth, it is crucial to ensure that the benefits reach all sections of society and address existing socio-economic disparities. Inclusive growth entails creating opportunities for marginalized communities, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and investing in human capital development. India needs to focus on capacity-building initiatives, skill development programs, and inclusive policies to ensure that its engagement contributes to the overall socio-economic development of these countries.

In addressing these challenges, India's strategy must consist of multiple components. Firstly, India should prioritize an approach that considers the specific needs and aspirations of each country as well as the specific concerns regarding Indian involvement. This includes conducting thorough assessments of the local context, engaging with key stakeholders, and developing tailored initiatives that address the specific challenges faced by each country. Further, India must focus on bolstering the indigenous capacities of smaller island nations to enable their resilience in the face of a range of different security challenges. In this, India could enhance its collaboration with other Indian Ocean countries, most notably Australia and France. India must focus on emphasizing transparency and accountability in its wider engagement with the IOR.

In conclusion, while India's new diplomatic engagement with the Maldives, Madagascar, and Mauritius has made significant strides, some challenges remain. Competition with other external actors, balancing development projects with local sensitivities and sustainability concerns, addressing historical and geopolitical complexities, and ensuring inclusive growth and addressing socio-economic disparities are crucial areas that require continued attention. By strengthening regional partnerships, promoting transparency and accountability, and focusing on people-to-people exchanges, India can overcome these challenges and further enhance its diplomatic engagement in these countries.

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