

WASHINGTON'S U-TURN TO THE INDIAN OCEAN ISLAND COUNTRIES

by
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It is implausible that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy can compete, contest, and contain China in the Indo-Pacific without focusing on the better half, the Indian Ocean. Also, it is highly unlikely that the competition between Washington and Beijing will remain limited to the Eastern part of the Indo-Pacific region, noticing the dynamic and increasing presence of both the U.S. and China in its western half, the Indian Ocean. If Beijing has made diplomatic, developmental, [institutional](#), and military inroads, likewise, the U.S. is also taking a U-turn to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that is well articulated in the bipartisan bill, which, if passed, will be known as [the Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act, 2024](#).

The two most distinctive attributes of the bill include the importance accorded to the island countries of the Indian Ocean and the [engagement with India](#) to 'better understand and operationalize economic and political opportunities across the Indian Ocean Region'. Building, expanding, and strengthening cooperation with both the island nations, the fence sitters and first line of defense; and New Delhi, the residential and proximate player in the Indian Ocean, will be a deciding factor on how the U.S. will navigate through the ebbs and flows of this vast water body.

Indian Ocean and its Island Countries

The Indian Ocean is nestled in a unique geography, circumscribed by continental boundaries on three sides of three different continents, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. This vast expanse is scattered with the presence of small island countries both independent and sovereign (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles) and overseas territory [Reunion and Mayotte (France), Cocos Keeling (Australia)] around the [chokepoints](#) which are pivotal for billions of dollars of global trade and energy transit. According to the [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#), out of

the eight most significant chokepoints for global crude and petroleum liquids, the top four (both in terms of volume and strategic significance) are in the Indian Ocean, [three](#) of which lie in the Arabian Peninsula in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO)—a region that is marred by continuous political instability, including the current Israel-Hamas conflict.

The passing of trade through these chokepoints around the island countries not only doubles the importance of these small yet strategically located island nations, but also demands securitization in and around these locations. The current [Houthi attacks](#) on global shipping are a testimony of how non-state actors have impacted the security dynamics in the WIO, thereby inviting various regional and extra-regional countries to [respond](#) and secure the trade. This necessitates that the capacity and capability of the locals (island states) must be increasingly enhanced to deal with the evolving challenges in their vicinity. One of the ways of doing this is by partnering with like-minded countries involved in the IOR.

What further adds to the significance of the Indian Ocean in general, and the island countries in particular, is the presence of polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides, and cobalt rich crusts in different areas of this expansive water body. Access to these minerals can revolutionize the development of several present and future related technologies. To this end, [exploration contracts](#) in the Central Indian Ocean, South West Indian Ridge, and Central Indian Ridge have already been announced by the International Seabed Authority (ISA).

The islands can also be used as a stopover during surveys or exploration missions by different countries. As resources on land become increasingly scarce, the maritime domain will likely emerge as a new hotbed that will define competition, contestation, and sometimes, cooperation among the countries.

Further, as major powers make inroads in the Indian Ocean through the prism of their Indo-Pacific strategies, each wants to secure its sphere of

influence not only diplomatically, and economically, but also militarily. To this end, the island nations are the most suitable locations in the vast maritime expanse to act as permanent aircraft carriers. They offer opportunities to expand the reach of respective militaries, thereby enhancing their deterrence abilities. Additionally, they are also sought after locations for conducting surveillance and reconnaissance activities in the maritime domain.

The island countries, during the Cold War, even after securing independence, continued to remain under the influence of their colonial masters due to political instability and slow economic progress, which also hampered their decision-making process. However, in present times, leaving aside one (Comoros), almost all (Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, Reunion islands) Indian Ocean islands have attained political stability, which has further propelled their engines of growth.

Consequentially, unlike the global phenomenon where countries are looking inward, the island nations are eager to work with like-minded countries that promote their interest and development first. However, that requires a developmental and institutional perspective distinct from that of the past.

U.S. Presence in the Indian Ocean

While the hotbed for the U.S. and the then USSR during the Cold War was the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean was no exception either. The Indian Ocean witnessed the military presence of the U.S. to contain and counter the Soviet Union's ideological and military influence in the region, and vice-versa.

Washington's efforts ranged from developing a military facility, [Diego Garcia](#) on the Chagos archipelago in the Central Indian Ocean to the running of a U.S. Airforce Tracking Station in Seychelles that monitored USSR satellites, and establishing a [NASA tracking station in Madagascar](#) (that was closed down later). The common denominator in the above geographical locations is that all of them are island countries in the Indian Ocean that are strategically located and are competent

enough to expand the intelligence and reconnaissance reach of the military.

While the threat (then USSR during the Cold War) and the nature of the threat (ideological rift) has changed in the post-Cold War era, however, a different threat to U.S. primacy has once again surfaced in the evolving global order. This time in the form of a belligerent China, which the U.S. considers a [comprehensive and serious challenge](#) to its national security having the endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system. As both, the rising power (China) and established power (U.S.) jockey for trade and investment on the one hand and engage in ensuring stability and security on the other in the Indian Ocean, they are likely to step on each other's toes thereby shaping the security and institutional architecture of the IOR.

Between these two distant rival powers lies India, a residential and proximate power in the Indian Ocean that shares historical, political, developmental, and defense ties with the island nations in the IOR. New Delhi has increasingly come to terms with the fact that the India-China contestation and crisis is no longer limited to South Asia. At the same time, it is evident that the ripples of this are very evident in the maritime domain under its belly. There is also a deeper realization not only in New Delhi but also in Washington and other like-minded partners that the IOR is too large for any one country to manage and govern. This requires a meeting of minds and joining of hands with friends and partners who share similar interests in managing the China challenge and dealing with other non-traditional issues like revival of piracy, illegal fishing, drug smuggling, among others.

Options for U.S.-India Collaboration in Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean has largely [remained](#) aloof from the presence of the U.S. Navy, until the beginning of the Second World War. The marginal presence during and after the war increased exponentially with the British withdrawal in 1971 under the [East of Suez](#) policy. Though Washington used the ideal locations on island countries to develop a military base or tracking stations. However, never in its history of engagement

did the U.S. come out with a policy paper focusing exclusively on the IOR, with the mention of island countries in it. But both these components are well reflected in the Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act 2024. Till now, the Indian Ocean itself has just been mentioned [substantively](#) in important U.S. policy papers like the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Therefore, it is for the first time that Washington has come out with a bipartisan bill that attempts to merge its aspirations and ambitions with actions in the IOR. Additionally, it highlights the role that the U.S. wishes to undertake with India, as both democracies ride on their respective Indo-Pacific strategy. What must Washington, being a distant power, do to enhance its stakes among the island countries of the IOR with the proximate power, India remains to be seen, especially as both New Delhi and Washington recently [conducted](#) the first Indian Ocean Dialogue.

First and foremost, the U.S. needs to bring about a shift in its approach. It needs to [shed](#) its image of solely being a military partner and using the island countries as platforms to project power. This strategy guided Washington during the Cold War, but it is unlikely to work in the 21st century.

Today, the need of the hour is that U.S. actions must be more benign and holistic, ensuring the development of the island countries that sit on the cusp of both opportunities and challenges. For instance, the U.S. has played a [remarkable](#) role in the [health](#), education, and [agriculture](#) sectors of Madagascar through its foreign aid arm, the U.S.

Agency for International Development (USAID). To this end, engaging in triangular developmental projects with India, a country that has diverse convergences with the U.S. and simultaneously enjoys considerable historical, diplomatic, and military weight in the region is a step in the right direction. It can begin with [undertaking](#) projects in non-controversial areas and sectors that are close to the daily life of people, like agriculture, women empowerment, renewable energy, building capacities, etc. Both partners are already working on similar projects in [Asia and Africa](#). They can further be extended to the IOR island countries. This will not only assist Washington in reviving its lost presence in the IOR but also help New Delhi advance and strengthen its influence amidst the evolving dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

To deal with China, the U.S. approach is one of [integrated deterrence](#), which focuses on horizontal and vertical [cooperation](#) across government agencies and involves [allies and partners](#) in all domains. Any shift from this looks unlikely under Trump 2.0. The centrality of the island countries for strategic purposes will only grow, looking at the anti-China report card of Trump 1.0. As Washington takes a U-turn towards the Indian Ocean to integrate it into the wider Indo-Pacific strategy, the right step in the right direction will mean balancing its military interests with the socio-economic interests of the island nations.

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