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Darshana M. Baruah & Yogesh Joshi

To cite this article: Darshana M. Baruah & Yogesh Joshi (2020): India's policy on Diego Garcia and its quest for security in the Indian Ocean, Australian Journal of International Affairs

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1769550>



Published online: 29 May 2020.



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India's policy on Diego Garcia and its quest for security in the Indian Ocean

Darshana M. Baruah^a and Yogesh Joshi ^b

^aSasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo, Japan; ^bInstitute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

The ongoing contention between Mauritius and the UK over the sovereignty of the Diego Garcia presents a difficult challenge for Indian foreign policy-makers. New Delhi's principled opposition to colonialism and its historical relationship with Port Louis has made it steadfastly support the Mauritian claim. However, such principled foreign policy militates against India's quest to balance the growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. Insofar, Diego Garcia allows the US Navy to maintain an active presence in the Indian Ocean, thereby keeping the Chinese naval power at bay. Balance of power considerations notwithstanding, the expanding trajectory of the Indo-US strategic partnership also demands New Delhi to weigh the burden of its policies on Diego Garcia carefully. This article juxtaposes India's historical record on Diego Garcia during the Cold War with its contemporary approach to the issue. In doing so, it sheds further light on India's strategic decision-making in the Indian Ocean, its dilemmas in confronting a genuinely hostile maritime power in the region, and deliberates on potential options for dispute resolution which can not only satisfy Mauritian demands but also ensure a healthy balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

KEYWORDS

Diego Garcia; Indian Ocean; balance of power; Indo-US relations; China

In May 2019, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of Mauritian claim of sovereignty over the island of Diego Garcia (United Nations General Assembly 2019). In the dispute over the islands, even though the primary contention is between the Mauritius government on one side and the UK and the US on the other, India's diplomatic and moral support to Mauritius has played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse (Solwalker 2017). As Robert Thorpe argues in *War on the Rocks*,

The dispute over the Chagos Islands cannot be understood without an appreciation of India's role. New Delhi has historical ties with Port Louis (around 68 per cent of Mauritians are of Indian descent), which extend to the political and cultural aspects of the relationship. Had India opposed Mauritius' territorial claims, or even just declined to support them, it is unlikely Mauritius would have pursued the matter. (Thorpe 2019)

If New Delhi's principled support to Port Louis has influenced the latter's renewed diplomatic effort to reclaim its sovereignty over Diego Garcia, any amicable resolution of the

dispute would also necessitate an Indian intervention. As David Brewster has suggested, 'India has a key role in resolving the issue, and its political influence in Mauritius cannot be overstated.' (Brewster 2019). Not without reason, therefore, both the US and British governments have repeatedly sought India's diplomatic support for their continued presence in the Chagos archipelago (Mitra 2017, 2018).

However, New Delhi has declared that it fully supports the return of Diego Garcia to the Mauritius Government and has not yet made any attempt to broker a deal between the two sides. To foreign policy analysts, India's 'decisive stand' on the issue is puzzling for several reasons (India Inc. 2019). Though New Delhi openly articulated its opposition to the US naval base in Diego Garcia especially during the Cold War (Deshpande 1974; Seth 1975), increasing Indo-US security cooperation in the post-Cold War period should have allowed New Delhi to overcome its Cold War mentality (Erikson, Ladwig, and Mikolay 2010; Ladwig 2012; Mishra 2018; US Department of State 2019). More importantly, Beijing is sure to view any US retrenchment from Diego Garcia as an invitation to entrench further its footprint in the Indian Ocean (Brewster 2019; VornDick 2018; Bashfield 2019). The Indian Navy sees the growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean as 'upsetting the strategic balance and adversely affecting the security of India' (Indian Navy 2004). In fact, during official level talks, India has conveyed to the US that irrespective of its decision to support Mauritius at the UNGA, it does not seek any 'change in the security framework in the Indian Ocean' (Mitra 2018). Lastly, in the post-Cold war period, there has been a constant shift in Indian foreign policy thinking. 'From Nehruvian idealism to Modi's offensive realism, India's foreign policy has become highly pragmatic' (Mohan 2003, 2006; Ganguly 2010; Ollapally and Rajagopalan 2011; Hall 2019). As India's foreign minister explained recently, it is 'important to recognize at a moment in world politics when many of our long-held assumptions no longer hold true. If the world is different, we need to think, talk and engage accordingly' (MEA 2019). New Delhi's stand on Diego Garcia, however, reflects the nostalgic preference for decolonization and anti-imperialism, prevalent in the post-independence foreign policy discourse (Chakravarthy 2019). Explaining India's response to Diego Garcia is essential not only to understand its approach to Indo-US strategic partnership, its strategy to contain China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean but also to comprehend the larger forces guiding India's foreign policy behaviour.

On Diego Garcia, India finds itself between a rock and a hard place. Supporting the withdrawal of the US Navy and returning the islands to the Mauritian government would undoubtedly impact the balance of power in the Indian Ocean. For all its quest for dominance of the Indian Ocean, New Delhi understands fully well the importance of US naval presence in the Indian Ocean as a stabilizing force and as a deterrent to Chinese schemes in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (MEA 2015a, 2017). However, to maintain its influence over Mauritian domestic politics and avoid providing China any sway over the Mauritian government, India will have to continue its diplomatic and moral support toward Port Louis. New Delhi cannot hand over the baton of anti-colonialism to Beijing, which will exploit it to gain a strategic foothold in India's backyard. Favourable domestic dispositions in Indian Ocean states has become an essential element of New Delhi's Indian Ocean strategy, evident in the recent turnaround in Indo-Sri Lanka and Indo-Maldives relations (Rajagopalan 2018). India's public declarations in support of the Mauritian government, therefore, should not be equated to

foreign policy idealism and anti-Americanism of any sort. In fact, while supporting Mauritius in the UNGA, New Delhi refused to heed Port Louis request to co-sponsor the resolution (Mitra 2018). Even in the heyday of the Cold War, the objective of India's support for decolonization in the Indian Ocean was countering the Chinese influence in the region rather than of other Great Powers (Joshi 2019). Indeed, historically speaking, India has encouraged Great Power presence in the area. On the surface, at least, India's contemporary behaviour is, therefore, a repeat of its Cold War playbook. However, this policy of 'running with the hare and hunting with the hounds' may not suffice in the changed geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. If the Chinese threat under Mao was primarily ideological, today, China boasts of impressive economic and military wherewithal in the Indian Ocean. India's profile in the region has also undergone a massive change. In the Cold War, India looked to the Great Powers to secure its interests in the region; today, New Delhi is presumed to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean (Gates 2009; Menon 2016). Indian decision-makers have not been able to separate the ideological and material challenges posed by China to India's eminence in the Indian Ocean.

This article first explains the evolution of India's policy on Diego Garcia during the Cold War. India's policy of overtly supporting decolonization and covertly encouraging Great Power presence in the region engendered out of two conflicting if not contradictory interests. The second section focusses on why India needs to revise its traditional strategic frameworks in the Indian Ocean. Unlike the Cold War, for the first time in its history, India has a genuinely hostile superpower at its doorsteps. The new great game in the Indian Ocean requires New Delhi to engage the US in balancing the Chinese influence actively. The third section locates the importance of Diego Garcia in the Indo-US naval balance of power in the Indian Ocean. Diego Garcia will play an essential role in the broader context of Sino-Indian maritime rivalry and the Indo-US strategic partnership. The last section reflects on how India, along with the US and UK, can devise a roadmap to resolve the issue of Diego Garcia's independence while securing their strategic imperatives.

Cold War, Diego Garcia, and the myth of India's anti-colonialism

New Delhi's steadfast anti-colonialism is the fundamental premise behind its support of the Mauritian Government's claim over Diego Garcia. Insofar, Diego Garcia remains the unfinished agenda of the process of decolonization in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi's ideological moorings combined with its public record of opposing colonialism leaves hardly any leeway for Indian foreign policy. So goes the conventional wisdom on India's Diego Garcia policy. Syed Akbaruddin, India's Permanent Representative to the UN, argued on the eve of the vote in the UN General Assembly, 'In accordance with our consistent approach on this important issue of decolonization, ... India will vote in favour of the draft resolution' (*Press Trust of India* 2019). Historical analysis of India's behaviour on Diego Garcia, however, suggests otherwise (Joshi 2019). Realpolitik, rather than principles of anti-colonialism, informed New Delhi's policy on Diego Garcia and the Indian Ocean.

In the post-independence period, Nehru's non-alignment coupled with India's predisposition towards its continental borders lulled New Delhi into a state of maritime complacency

(Chatterji 1989; Chaudhary 1995; Joshi 2018). However, the lack of interest in maritime affairs and the strategic defense of the Indian Ocean was equally induced by the fact that rather than a hostile power, the waters of the region were dominated by the British Navy. The combination of these ideological and structural reasons allowed Prime Minister Nehru to pay scant regard to the India's maritime defense. In a top-secret note on the future of Indian Armed Forces in February 1947, Nehru rejected any prospect of Indian Navy's rapid expansion (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library 1947). Nehru's calculations, as a report submitted to the Ministry of Defence in 1948, were primarily built upon the fact that from Malacca to Suez, the Indian Ocean was under the operational dominance of the British Navy (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library 1948). 'India's strategic plan of defence' was, therefore, 'operationally planned in close collaboration' with its great power friends (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library 1948). For its maritime security, India opted to silently bandwagon with the British.

Though the debacle of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 forced New Delhi to seek US assistance in strengthening its defenses along the Chinese frontier, it further consolidated the continental character of Indian security outlook (Chaudhuri 2014). However, the strategy of bandwagoning with Western powers continued. During the 1962 war, when Prime Minister (PM) Nehru requested air assistance from President Kennedy, the 'aircraft carrier of the seventh fleet was detailed to steam at full speed for the Bay of Bengal.' (National Archives of India 1965a). New Delhi also saw merit in US military presence in Asia. When the US Navy first announced its intention to send the 7th fleet into the Indian Ocean in December 1963, Nehru's stance was one of silent approval (FBIS 1963; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library 1963). Washington told New Delhi that the sailing of the 7th fleet was to 'demonstrate that the US was interested in defense of the area and the American armed might would be available if aggression takes place' (National Archives of India 1965a). The presence of the US Navy in the Indian Ocean also provided an effective deterrent against any Chinese naval activity in the region (National Archives of India 1965b).

Such was the strategic background against which the issue of Diego Garcia first animated the Indian foreign policy. If the defeat in 1962 incentivized New Delhi's change of heart in seeking active military support from the West, the Chinese nuclear test of 1964 provided an even more significant strategic logic for supporting the US presence in the Indian Ocean. It also punctured the image of India as a loadstar of democratic development in the Third World. Indian decision-makers were concerned with not only the immediate security implications of Chinese nuclear tests but also its prestige among the underdeveloped (Joshi 2017). As a top-secret assessment made within India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) suggested,

India's influence and reputation in the Asian-African world was based on her policy of peace and non-alignment and her unique experiment in social and economic development. The Lop Nor explosion has held up to public gaze the contrast between the two systems in terms of material progress. (National Archives of India 1964)

This predicament between India's national security and increasing Chinese influence among the Afro-Asian countries extended even to its policy on the Indian Ocean (Verma 1964).

The proposal to establish an Anglo-American base in the Indian Ocean was reported to New Delhi by India's Commissioner to Mauritius in January 1965 (National Archives of

India 1965c). Indian representative at Port Louis warned of an impending agreement between Britain and the Government of Mauritius for the establishment of the military base as a condition for early independence of the island nation. This news led to a huddle within the MEA, and the question of the Anglo-American military base was discussed at length in the Indian Foreign Secretary's office on 18 January 1965. The majority opinion within the Ministry was to take a 'strong stand against the establishment of this base' primarily because India's stated policy had been 'one of opposition to all foreign military bases.' (National Archives of India 1965c) In the September 1964 Cairo conference of the Non-aligned States, India had supported the call made by Sri Lankan President to convert the Indian Ocean into a Zone of Peace; (Conference of the Heads of States or Governments of the Non Aligned Countries 1964). Therefore, many in the MEA feared that reluctance in opposing the base would 'be greatly misunderstood' by the Afro-Asian bloc, and Beijing could leverage such discontent in fomenting its anti-imperialist propaganda (Conference of the Heads of States or Governments of the Non Aligned Countries 1964). China had already started canvassing for a more significant role in Indian Ocean politics by championing the cause of anti-imperialism in the region. During his 14-nation visit to the Western Indian Ocean in April 1964, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai repeatedly stressed the need for an Asian revolution against imperialist powers and eradication of all foreign military presence from the region (Foreign Information Broadcast Service (FBIS) 1964a). As Zhou Enlai argued in Colombo,

the US Seventh Fleet is preparing to enter the Indian Ocean to jeopardize peace and security of this region further. By pursuing these policies in Asia, US imperialism is only landing itself in ever tighter encirclement of the Asian People and hastening the advent of its final expulsion from Asia. (FBIS 1964b)

Insofar the issue of foreign military bases rankled the domestic politics of the Indian Ocean states; it also provided a fertile ground for exporting Maoist revolutionary ideas to Afro-Asia.

India's interest in countering Chinese ideological influence in the Indian Ocean, however, ran counter to its immediate security requirements. In the backdrop of the Chinese nuclear test, the Indian PM Lal Bahadur Shastri demanded joint security guarantees from the Great Powers (Schrafstetter 2002). The Indian appeal for nuclear guarantees found some traction with the UK and the US, but the Soviet Union viewed such requests as an invitation to American entrenchment in the Indian Ocean (Joshi 2019). Great Power dissonance and the compulsions of India's non-aligned foreign policy forced New Delhi to retreat from this diplomatic offensive. However, in private, India viewed increasing US presence in the Indian Ocean as a tacit deterrent against Chinese nuclear weapons. Under this scheme, the US presence in Diego Garcia was a blessing in disguise. Therefore, even when there was a strong opinion within the MEA to support Afro-Asian opposition to Anglo-American base in Diego Garcia, influential voices in the MEA argued against 'any lead in opposing' the Anglo-American Base (National Archives of India 1965c). As the head of MEA's Disarmament Division, Eric Gonsalves, explained in a letter to Indian foreign secretary YD Gundevia,

The nature of the action to be taken by us on this question has to be considered in the light of its strategic/political implications in the present context. From our point of view, the Chinese

nuclear menace is an important factor which cannot be ignored in any strategic assessment of the area. (National Archives of India 1965b)

Gundevia fully supported this view. In a top-secret memo summing up the internal discussion over Diego Garcia, Gundevia set the tone and tenor of India's policy:

It is true that we have subscribed to the nonaligned nations declaration, which opposed the establishment of a western base in the Indian Ocean. But I would submit that, for reasons stated in the notes on earlier pages, we have to associate this question, as far as India is concerned, with the Chinese nuclear explosions at Lop Nor. We cannot ever talk about these matters without a direct reference to Lop Nor. As I have repeatedly said in the notes on the subject, at various stages, Lop Nor is nearer the Indian Border than any of the British Colonial islands on the Indian Ocean. If Mrs. Bhandaranaike shouts about Chagos, because it is nearer to Ceylon than Lop Nor; the same argument must apply, in reverse, to Lop Nor, which is a slap across our northern borders. We cannot talk about islands in the Indian Ocean, without condemning Chinese Nuclear land bases, nearer to our borders. (National Archives of India 1965c)

These views found resonance at the highest levels of the Indian Government. As LK Jha, Prime Minister Shastri's principal secretary advised him in a top-secret note of March 1965, even when the 'Afro-Asian powers are averse to the idea of nuclear weapons being carried in the Ocean close to their borders,' New Delhi has to 'live with a hostile nuclear power on its borders.' For India, therefore, it was 'difficult' to be 'equally averse to movements of nuclear weapons of Powers more friendly to us in the Indian Ocean.' (National Archives of India 1965d) Thereupon, New Delhi made a conscious decision not to make 'undue noise' over the proposed communications facility in Diego Garcia. The resultant policy was one of generalized opposition to the base: 'we should, therefore, not be vociferous on the question of the proposed Western base in the Indian Ocean; and we should not express any views on this question, at any stage, in any Afro-Asian conference or Afro Asian circles.' (National Archives of India 1965c)

India's deft diplomatic maneuvering aimed to achieve the best of both the worlds: it ran along with its Third World colleagues and silently hounded with its Great Power friends. India's calculation was simple; irrespective of the gravity of Afro-Asian opposition, the US and UK would establish the base if they so intended. India's resistance would, therefore, bring no real change. As LK Jha told the British High Commissioner in New Delhi in December 1965, 'Indian government did not propose to push their protest beyond a formal objection. British base in the Indian Ocean might well be in the long term be of advantage to India.' (The National Archives 1967) Yet, India could not openly support the British plan in the Indian Ocean as it could have created enormous diplomatic difficulties for New Delhi. On the one hand, it would have decreased India's influence among the Afro-Asians. On the other hand, it would have supported the long-running Chinese claims that India was a 'running dog of imperialism.' Burgeoning Chinese influence among the Afro-Asian and that at India's cost would have made the Afro-Asian states vulnerable to Maoist propaganda.

The 1966 British Defence White Paper recommended relocation of British naval assets operating east of Suez. As the British prepared to leave the Indian Ocean in the late 1960s, New Delhi feared that hostile powers would try to establish a toehold in the Indian Ocean. These considerations motivated the Indian naval staff to argue of a 'vacuum of maritime power' theory: that in the face of British withdrawal, 'inimical

forces' will take over the custody of the Indian Ocean (Chatterji 1966).¹ It is not hard to guess who precisely these hostile powers were. Even when 'the projection of US naval power and the Soviet naval power into the Indian Ocean is of great political significance,' as K. Subrahmanyam argued, 'strategically, they are likely to be mutually deterrent' (Subrahmanyam 1968). Instead, the concern was whether the vacuum left by the British would allow China to 'extend her influence' by cooperating with Pakistan in the region (Subrahmanyam 1968, 11). The threat was not from the superpowers but the locals (Dutta 1969). Not without reason, therefore, the Indian Naval Chief Admiral AK Chatterjee suggested a forward naval policy in the Indian Ocean, including the establishment of a fuelling base in Mauritius (The National Archives 1968). India's civilian decision-makers, however, demurred over extending India's sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean. As far as deterring China was concerned, Great Power presence in the Indian Ocean was highly reassuring. As a top-secret assessment made in PM Indira Gandhi's office stated,

just as nobody in India can be certain that the United States would use its nuclear weapons against China in the event of a Chinese threat to India, nobody in China can be certain that the United States will not use its nuclear weapons against her. (National Archives of India 1970)

US naval operation in the Indian Ocean served India's purpose of perceptual deterrence vis-à-vis China. Even when the US was contemplating a withdrawal from Vietnam and a new regional security framework of lesser American involvement in Asia in late 1960s, New Delhi continued to believe that 'American strength would be available' to support friendly regional countries (National Archives of India 1969). However, by the end of 1960s, American patience with India's diplomatic juggling on US military presence in the Indian Ocean was approaching its limits. For the Nixon administration, 'it was not sufficient that India privately want US military presence' in Asia while claiming 'exactly the opposite in public.' (National Archives of India 1969) As India's strategy of silent bandwagoning with the US started to fall apart in 1970s, its decolonization rhetoric on Diego Garcia became highly energetic.

India's policy on Diego Garcia reminds one of Adlai Stevenson's famous remark: 'it is easy to fight for principles than to live up to them.' India's behaviour on Diego Garcia was from the beginning dictated by its security requirements rather than an unwavering commitment to decolonization. Yet, New Delhi had to maintain the façade of anti-imperialism so as not to provide Beijing an ideological toehold in Afro-Asia. Publicly, India criticized the Anglo-American deal; privately, it condoned and even supported the arrangement. As new archival research demonstrates, New Delhi became much more rabid in its criticism of the American presence in the Indian Ocean only in the early 1970s (Joshi 2019). Sino-American bonhomie and the US tilt to Islamabad under Richard Nixon was primarily responsible for this shift. If India earlier rode upon the US coattails in the Indian Ocean, by the early 1970s, increasing strategic alignment with the Soviet Union provided India an alternative Great Power balancer in the region. Moralistic principles of decolonization and anti-imperialism were seldom the premise of India's behaviour on Diego Garcia or the broader geopolitics in the Indian Ocean; instead, it was genuinely reflective of India's realpolitik foreign policy (Joshi 2019).

Indian Ocean's geopolitics and New Delhi's for a reassessment

During the Cold War, three significant assumptions drove India's approach towards Diego Garcia. First, New Delhi considered the Chinese threat in the IOR to be primarily ideological rather than military. Second, India assumed that Western powers like the UK and the US have an inherent interest in maintaining a robust presence in the Indian Ocean, even at the expense of inviting criticism from the littoral states. India could, therefore, silently bandwagon with the Western powers in maintaining a favourable balance of power in the Indian Ocean. Third, the most cost-effective strategy for India, therefore, was to publicly align with regional states on the issue of decolonization and anti-imperialism while privately encouraging the Western powers to stay put in the Indian Ocean. Such a strategy helped New Delhi to maintain a strong influence among small states in the IOR as a bulwark against Maoist ideology, while accruing the benefits of security provided by the Western naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

The result of this strategic framework was that Independent India placed little importance on its maritime domain and the potential of the Indian Ocean in its strategic calculations. Even when Indian strategists such as K.M. Panikkar underlined the importance of the Indian Ocean for its security and global aspirations, the lack of any real threat and the presence of benign superpowers—first the Western Powers and then the Soviet Union—translated into a foreign policy discourse neglecting the maritime domain (Panikkar 1945, 1946a, 1946b). Even in the post-Cold War period, with the advent of American hegemony, New Delhi readily accepted American presence in the Indian Ocean as part of the broader security umbrella (Vogt 1993, 190). Given the absence of any immediate competition at Delhi's doorstep, India ignored and often took for granted its relationship with its maritime neighbours. Decades of strategic negligence and perceived intervention in their internal affairs have led to growing resentment amongst the island nations of the Indian Ocean, for whom India is a key security partner (Hall 2019).

The last two decades have, however, altered India's strategic landscape. Indian Ocean's contemporary geopolitics stands in marked contrast to the Cold War or the period immediately after. The fundamental assumptions on which India carried its Indian Ocean policy stand wholly transformed. First, unlike the Cold War, where superpower presence was not directly inimical to Indian interests, China's forays in the Indian Ocean are particularly distressing for New Delhi. For the first time in its history, there is a genuinely hostile superpower emerging in India's immediate neighbourhood (Mohan 2012). China's phenomenal military and economic rise, and its emergence as the primary challenger to US hegemony has brought Great Power politics to India's immediate frontiers, both continental and maritime. Second, even when China was a major threat during the Cold War, the battle was largely ideological. Today, however, the Chinese power in the region flows through the barrel of economic assistance, infrastructure and connectivity projects, and the rapid expansion of China's maritime power (The Heritage Foundation 2011; China Power Team 2017).² Lastly, even when Delhi covertly welcomed American presence in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War, and after, continued US presence in the IOR is now suspect, and India cannot continue to piggyback upon American power alone. For one, Indian and Chinese interests directly clash in the Indian Ocean; the stakes, therefore, are much higher, calling for a more active and engaged policy rather than to merely bandwagon on the US (Rajagopalan 2017).

Second, the relative capacity of the US to maintain a positive balance of power in the region is now under stress (Mohan 2012). The reemergence of neo-isolationist tendencies in the US foreign policy has left a shadow of doubt on Washington's commitment to tackle the Chinese challenge head-on.³ India will have to actively balance Chinese power, which it cannot do on its own (Rajagopalan 2020). Given that India may have to resort to an external balancing strategy vis-à-vis China, it needs to carefully assess its strategic necessities before committing itself to any firm position on the issue of Diego Garcia.

The Sino-Indian competition is not new, given the long-running border dispute along the Himalayan frontier. However, the Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean is a development Delhi did not quite foresee. Even as China began to take a firm stand in the South China Sea and clearly stated the importance of maritime security for its global ambitions, Delhi erred towards underestimating Beijing's interests in the Indian Ocean (MEA 2015a; Watson 2016).⁴ Beginning in 2010, China started taking steps to demonstrate its nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea. It increasingly took an aggressive stance in protecting what it considered its sovereign territory, encapsulating almost eighty percent of the South China Sea, a key trading route. Through much of the developments in the South China Sea, India remained distant and quiet on the issue while Delhi's ASEAN friends, like Vietnam, opposed unilateral Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Commenting on ongoing hostilities in the South China Sea, the then Indian Chief of Navy in 2012, ruled out any possibilities of a deployment to the region underlining the Indian Ocean as an area of priority (Dutt 2012). Apart from the South China Sea being Delhi's secondary area of interest,⁵ India's political architects were perhaps too cautious of Beijing's sentiments and their consequences on the shared continental border (Raghavan 2016). Delhi also appeared convinced of its superiority in the region and that the Indian Ocean was too distant a theatre for active Chinese engagement.⁶

However, amidst Delhi's complacency, Beijing understood the importance of the maritime domain in securing its global strategic interests. China began engaging with the littorals and island nations of the Indian Ocean, slowly increasing its strategic and economic footprints in the region. Moreover, Beijing's outreach in the region consisted of substantive engagements through political, economic, and military partnerships. In the Indian Ocean, Delhi perhaps began to take serious notice of Chinese presence in the area when a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarine docked at Colombo in 2014 (Pandit 2014). Rather than focusing on growing Chinese capabilities and influence in the region, India's reaction instead concentrated upon Sri Lanka's decision to host PLAN submarines, further alienating the Sri Lankan leadership (Rajya Sabha 2014). At that point however, privately, senior naval officers remained confident that China's is far from posing any serious threat to India in the Indian Ocean.

Beijing's proactive diplomacy and PLAN's capability projection in the Indian Ocean was evident during the 2014 water crisis in Maldives. The PLAN's ability to quickly arrive in Maldives with aid and assistance to help the island, only second to the Indian Navy, perhaps accelerated the unfolding Sino-Indian competition (BBC 2014; *The Indian Express* 2014). Overestimating its strengths and misjudging Chinese intent, Delhi had failed to read the shifting strategic tea leaves in the Indian Ocean. The Maldives crisis proved beyond doubt that Beijing's purposive consolidation of naval capability in the Indian Ocean was beginning to eliminate the constraints imposed by distance and geography. The Sino-Indian competition also bestowed a strategic heft on the Island states. Long

ignored in Indian Ocean's geopolitics, Island states could now significantly influence foreign policy choices of their bigger neighbours. If the submarines in Sri Lanka underlined Beijing's military intentions, the Maldives water crises demonstrated Beijing's ambitions of being a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. This transition in Chinese naval capabilities and intentions was evident in the 2015 White Paper on Defence which underlined the need for 'open seas protection' from its previous priority on 'offshore waters defence' (Blasko 2015). This posited shift in Chinese military strategy from operating in near seas to sustaining operations in far seas, a development largely interpreted as a move toward the Indian Ocean (Upadhyay 2017). The white paper prioritized safeguarding its 'maritime rights and interests' of Chinese islands and reefs threatened by the US, Japan and their allies (Blasko 2015). After a period of relative calm during the post-Cold War era of US unipolarity, the burgeoning Sino-US and Sino-Indian competition in Asia has once again made the Indian Ocean a critical geography of contemporary Great Power politics (Kaplan 2010; Mohan 2015).

New geopolitical developments brought about by China's expanding presence dramatically altered India's security environment in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The possibility of Beijing emerging as an additional and perhaps an alternate security provider in the neighbourhood forced India to reevaluate its Indian Ocean strategy. A theatre that largely remained at the periphery of Indian foreign policy and its strategic choices have today begun to mark its presence at the core of India's foreign policy engagements. The rise of China and consequent geopolitical changes are primarily responsible for Delhi's new-found enthusiasm in the maritime domain. One of India's key advantages in the Indian Ocean is geography and operational experience. That advantage, however, could now be matched by Beijing through logistical hubs and routine exercises in the region. In providing China with logistical support for its Navy—which could significantly alter the Indian Navy's strategic calculations—Islands States came to the fore in the emerging Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean. By the time Delhi acknowledged Chinese presence in its maritime neighbourhood, Beijing was deeply engaged in diplomatic, political, and economic collaborations with islands from Sri Lanka to Madagascar. China quickly emerged as a reliable alternative to the island nations in need of better connectivity and infrastructure development. More so, it was an opportunity for Island States to convey its disappointment with India as a regional leader. While Island States continue to have security partners other than India such as the US and France, their presence and influence are more prominent in sub-regions such as the Western Indian Ocean which also carry colonial and historical mistrust. China on the other hand, has consistently pursued its interests and engagements across the entire island chain in the Indian Ocean presenting itself as an alternative to traditional players in the region. Moreover, while Beijing's presence threaten India's role, Washington and Paris support a more active India in the Indian Ocean.

Delhi was surprised by how quickly the region welcomed an alternative to India in the Indian Ocean (Baruah and Mohan 2019). For the first time, states in the Indian Ocean could choose a security partner other than New Delhi. From submarines in Sri Lanka, an anti-India government in the Maldives, discontent in Mauritius and Seychelles, to ignored Madagascar and Comoros—slowly but surely Delhi realized Beijing's expanding presence and the emergence of a new competitor in the Indian Ocean. More so, the competition this time was not on ideological grounds but rather on substantial political,

military, and economic engagements. Consequently, India's initiatives such as the 'neighbourhood first' policy marked the delayed acceptance of the new geopolitics of the Indian Ocean (Pal 2016). India not only had to reinvest in bilateral relationships, it traditionally considered to be within its 'strategic umbrella,' but it also realized that arresting the changing dynamics of power relations in the region would require cooperation with other like-minded states. Although Delhi continued to remain a key security player for most of its maritime neighbours, it was no longer the only power in the region. The task confronting the Indian decision-makers is, therefore, extremely tricky. New Delhi not only has to insulate the area from China's growing power and influence but also has to rebuild its relationships with Island nations while competing with Beijing.

A growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean also highlights another critical development—the reduced importance of the Indian Ocean in Washington's foreign policy priorities. For the US, increasing commitments in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia took the focus away from the Indian Ocean region. Though a democratic India taking the lead in the Indian Ocean is Washington's best option, India also requires Washington to remain engaged in the region (Blackwill and Tellis 2019). However, US presence in the Indian Ocean has decreased considerably: the only US Navy ships in the Indian Ocean came to be the ones in transit between the 5th fleet in Bahrain and the 7th fleet in Japan, rather than specific deployments to the Indian Ocean (USNI Fleet Tracker). Additionally, the US Indian Ocean strategy has been a fraction of its larger Indo-Pacific strategy—a theatre encompassing both the Indian and the Pacific Oceans (US Department of State 2018). US bilateral engagements with Indian Ocean countries has been through its South Asia or Africa divisions rather than a pan Indian Ocean approach. As a result, the US Navy has more substantial engagement with the littorals and island states of South Asia and the Gulf. Its presence in the rest of the theatre, and especially in the western Indian Ocean, can be considered negligible. Washington, as a resident power in the Indian Ocean, has now been reduced to its naval base in Diego Garcia—primarily used for its engagements in the Gulf and Afghanistan following the Cold War. US maritime priorities appear limited to the Pacific and Southeast Asia—with the Indian Ocean becoming a distant concern. While the US cannot entirely withdraw from the region, it has consistently encouraged India to take the lead in providing security in the Indian Ocean (Gates 2009).

As both Delhi and Washington face the new reality of Chinese power in the Indian Ocean, an effective balancing strategy requires both states to engage with each other on collaborations across commercial and military avenues. New Delhi should realize that the era of bandwagoning on American power is over. Washington DC, on the other hand, should acknowledge that it has limited resources and influence in the region and closer strategic alignment with New Delhi is its only option. Diego Garcia will be a significant test of their Indian Ocean policy.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy and Diego Garcia

Although late, New Delhi did start responding to the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. India gradually realized and acknowledged that Chinese intent and ambition is not limited to the South China Sea but expands across the Indian Ocean and much of the world, directly affecting its own strategic space and interests. Prime Minister Modi's

visit to Indian Ocean island states in March 2015 was predicated on the necessity to revive New Delhi's influence and engagement in the region (MEA 2015b). When he visited the islands of Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka, it was the first visit by an Indian Head of State in nearly three decades. Modi was also due to visit the Maldives, completing a visit to all the island states located in India's immediate strategic space. However, President Abdullah Yameen's anti-India stance and his closeness with Beijing complicated Modi's calculations (Chaudhury 2015; Parashar 2018). Of late, Sri Lanka and the Maldives cultivated China as a balancing factor vis-à-vis India. The fault also lay with India: New Delhi's limited engagements and the lack of a collaborative approach intensified the anti-India sentiment across the island chain in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, India's key priority was to re-engage with the island states, encapsulated in Modi's 'neighbourhood first' policy.

Consequently, New Delhi started attaching higher importance to both continental South Asia and but also the Island States in the Indian Ocean. Given that Beijing had already made significant inroads in political, economic and security spheres of the Island States with considerable military and commercial investments, the road for India's re-engagement was a difficult one. Today, India's re-engagement only ensures Delhi a place in the geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean; it does not guarantee India a favourable position based on its historical ties with the Island States. To mark the importance of the region, India's MEA even created the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) division: a separate desk dedicated solely to boost Delhi's ties with the island nations. However, the IOR division only coordinated engagements between India and the island states of Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles. MEA's decision to leave Madagascar and Comoros—the only other two island nations in the IOR—reflects the lack of a coherent strategy for the region at large (Baruah 2019a). The division was finally expanded to include the two islands only in December 2019 (*The Wire* 2019).

As India adopts a more pragmatic foreign policy approach in a renewed security environment, it should also apply it to the case of Diego Garcia. If China seeks to create influence and use the strategic potential of the islands to engage, sustain, and maintain a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean, Delhi and its friends have an option to engage with the strategic island territories of the region. Cocos-Keeling of Australia, Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India, Diego Garcia of US/UK (in dispute with Mauritius), and La Reunion of France all provide excellent strategic vantage points to counter any growing hostile power to India's interests in the region (Baruah 2019b). While most of the island territories, except Diego Garcia, remain small military outposts for their respective nations, these islands sit across vital Sea Lanes of Communications, providing access over the critical entry and exit points into the Indian Ocean. Forgotten geographies in the Cold War, Indian Ocean's Great power politics has catapulted the Island states into strategic limelight.

In the current security environment, Diego Garcia plays a critical role. It hosts perhaps the most sophisticated naval facility amongst all the island territories in the Indian Ocean region. Initially conceived as communications facility in late 1960s, Diego Garcia has been transformed into a 'full-fledged naval support facility that enabled numerous bombing runs during the first Gulf war and the 2001 war in Afghanistan' (Erickson and Mikolay 2006, 65–94). Diego Garcia has been critical for US not only for the military campaigns in the Gulf and Afghanistan but also Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in

South China Sea, creating a system and coherent logistical capability in the Indian Ocean (Ho 2019). In the post-Cold War era, the base's importance has been linked to extended air power across the Indian Ocean for both logistical purposes and as a 'strategic bomber base' (Lord 2006, 1–8). Diego Garcia remains 'a critical U.S. base for prepositioning, refueling, and crew rest for B-2 and B-1 missions' (Harkavy 2006, 9–32). Diego Garcia is probably one of the only overseas bases in the Indian Ocean with the necessary infrastructure and force presence to support diverse missions in the region, both naval and air. The convenient proximity of the facility to all the littoral states in the IOR adds to its advantage. Without Diego Garcia, US presence in the region will not only be reduced but will also be highly questionable.

As Delhi looks to maintain its advantages in the IOR, collaboration with the US Navy has become a critical factor in its maritime engagements. That the US Navy maintains a presence in the IOR is crucial for two reasons. First, China looks at the US as its global competitor (Cordesman 2019). Washington's presence constitutes an effective deterrent vis-à-vis China's rise in the region. Two, the vastness of the Indian Ocean region and India's limited naval capabilities suggest that New Delhi cannot possibly respond effectively to all the diverse and demanding exigencies in the region (Pant and Rej 2018). To achieve its strategic goals, Delhi needs collaborations and support through logistics facilities, intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness and training in critical areas, making its partnership with Washington a crucial factor in its Indian Ocean ambitions. While India can take the lead, it still needs partners and shared resources to maintain its active presence and respond to myriad security requirements in the Indian Ocean (Baruah 2019a).

In interviews with the naval community and policymakers, both in Delhi and Washington, a common area of interest and priorities in strengthening the Indo-US maritime partnership appear to be Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) with the end goal of intelligence sharing.⁷ Diego Garcia is strategically situated to address these goals. The island territories of Andaman and Nicobar and Diego Garcia provide excellent platforms for anti-submarine training as well as for MDA missions. Collaborations between India and the US using their respective naval facilities will strengthen their ability to sustain and conduct MDA missions across the Indian Ocean, individually and collectively. The US Navy has considerable experience and capability in monitoring the Indian Ocean and generating a coherent picture for MDA. The signing of the Logistics Exchange of Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between India and the US creates the foundation for such possible collaborations (Peri 2018). The LEMOA, on a case to case basis, allows the two navies to access and operate out of each other's military facilities easing logistical and administrative processes (Peri 2018). The LEMOA, should there be political will, could facilitate movement of the Indian Navy's P-8i to and from Diego Garcia for both ASW and MDA missions (Baruah 2019c). Delhi has used a similar agreement with France to undertake P-8i operations from La Reunion, a French overseas territory in the Indian Ocean (Peri 2020). Such an approach could also potentially enable the US Navy access to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Such cooperation will not only increase Delhi's ability to monitor the Indian Ocean but also expand its regional footprint. Access to US facilities as well as training on MDA and ASW exercises and missions increases India's ability to respond to a rising China threat in its maritime environment. Joint use of resources and information also addresses Delhi's capital and capacity

constraints as it aims to expand and strengthen its presence across the Indian Ocean. U.S. facilities in Diego Garcia and the Gulf, as in Bahrain, could help the Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment (MBD), expanding and sustaining its presence across critical chokepoints.

Though the current geopolitical churning has created new vulnerabilities for New Delhi, it also offers novel opportunities to further Indo-US naval cooperation. India cannot continue to follow a Janus-faced strategy of supporting US presence on the one hand and championing decolonization on the other, as it did during the Cold War. The changed strategic environment necessitates New Delhi to fully embrace the logic of US presence in the Indian Ocean while mediating negotiations over Mauritius' sovereignty over the islands. Bridging the gap between India's security requirements and its commitment to Mauritian sovereignty, however, is not entirely a zero-sum game. Delhi is faced with the dilemma of its renewed engagements and support toward Island States to minimise Chinese influence and the importance of Diego Garcia for favourable Indian Ocean dynamics. On one hand, India's principles on decolonization combined with its bilateral ties with Mauritius make it difficult for Delhi to question or challenge Port Louis' sovereignty claims. India is wary of upsetting Mauritius and giving an advantage to Chinese ambitions in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the need for continued US presence in the Indian Ocean and India's capacity constraints underscores the strategic importance of Diego Garcia in the region. New Delhi needs to communicate to Port Louis why US presence in the Diego Garcia is so critical to overall stability in the Indian Ocean.

Indo-US roadmap for Diego Garcia

If India needs to recalibrate its approach towards Diego Garcia, it should continue do so while supporting and respecting Mauritius' rights and interests. Although it may appear contradictory to support both the US base in IOR and Mauritius claims to the Chagos Archipelago, Delhi should make a distinction between its commitment to decolonization and a shift in its strategic interest. To begin with, India could publicly acknowledge the importance of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean security while emphasizing its support toward Mauritius right to claim sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago. India's policy of supporting the base quietly while opposing it publicly has sent wrong and confusing messages to Washington on Delhi's Indian Ocean priorities. Moving forward, Washington and Delhi will have to work together to find a practical solution through mediation between Mauritius and the UK.

In pursuing a strategy of multi-alignment, Delhi acknowledges the difference between traditional alliance and strategic alignments (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). As it continues its new maritime policy of active engagements, Delhi has managed to come to agreements on politically sensitive initiatives such as the LEMOA, which took nearly eleven years to conclude. Similarly, it now stands to benefit by embracing the new realities of the IOR, where it would have to accept both its traditional anti-colonial stand while prioritizing its strategic interests. Delhi should adopt a new approach toward its policy on Diego Garcia, one that addresses its own capacity constraints and help expand its strategic reach. It might be helpful to separate the sovereignty issue from that of existence of the US naval base. On the question of the military base at Diego Garcia, Mauritian PM Pravind K. Jugnauth has already indicated the Base can

remain, even after Port Louis wins sovereignty over the islands (UNGA 2017). Instead of supporting the base behind closed doors, Delhi will have to openly embrace the logic of US presence and its importance in the changing strategic environment of the region, while also respecting the norms of its anti-colonial principles as it helps to garner domestic support in Mauritius. Even during the Cold War, the balance of power considerations was the primary factor in India's approach to the question of Diego Garcia; that compelling logic should continue to guide New Delhi's Indian Ocean policy. India gains significantly through access to Diego Garcia, and the possibilities of the US-India collaborations remain unparalleled with such an approach. It is in Delhi's interest to keep the US engaged in the Indian Ocean.

As India seeks to insulate the region from China's influence, it can use this opportunity to help Mauritius negotiate a new agreement allowing for greater control and access to the Chagos Archipelago. Under the current arrangement, the Mauritius government has little power or influence over the Chagos Archipelago unless invited by London diplomatically. The UK should acknowledge that it has no legs to stand on in its current agreement, finalized at the time of Mauritius' independence in the 1960s and under considerable duress. Britain's expectation of continuing with this archaic arrangement is entirely unrealistic. India's task, however, will not be easy. Even after the UN decision where only six countries, including the US and the UK, voted in favour of London, Britain will most likely continue to assert its claims on Diego Garcia. Overwhelming support in the UN has, however, strengthened Port Louis's claims. Ideally, mediation and negotiations over the dispute should have been concluded before the UNGA vote. However, not all is lost. Rather than perceiving Deigo Garcia as a zero-sum game, London, Mauritius, Washington, and New Delhi should revise their respective policies to arrive at a mutually beneficial resolution.

The first step towards resolving the Diego Garcia problem is to accept the UK's historical misconduct over the Chagos Archipelago (Vine 2009). Mauritius is right in challenging UK's possession of the Chagos Archipelago, as was evident in the ICJ verdict (United Nations 2019). While Mauritius has demanded complete jurisdiction over Diego Garcia, Port Louis is well-aware of the challenges it faces in securing its sovereignty over the Diego Garcia, located approx. 1000 miles away from its shores. With an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 2.3 million sq. Km, the island nation already faces non-traditional threats such as illegal fishing, human trafficking, and drug smuggling (Malcolm and Murday 2017, 234–236). Port Louis struggles to monitor its vast EEZ and seeks support from partners such as India in keeping its waters safe and secure. The additional responsibility of securing the EEZ around Diego Garcia, will further challenge its capacity constraints. Washington and India can work together to help Mauritius understand the benefits of US presence in the Indian Ocean for Port Louis's security and interests. It would be helpful for Washington to highlight Diego Garcia's role in addressing Mauritius' security threats and challenges. This might be more effective in underlining the logic of US presence on the base. Moreover, a military agreement with China on Diego Garcia—a possibility feared by the US and UK—will not be easy either, given Mauritius' strong security relationship with India and its global image of having just gained control of the islands after decades of foreign rule (Thorpe 2019).⁸

Port Louis' primary interest in Diego Garcia is access to natural resources of the Chagos archipelago. If ultimately returned to Mauritius, Port Louis neither has the capital nor the

capacity to monitor the waters for illegal fishing, drug smuggling, and other security challenges. It will be equally challenging to build infrastructure for the resettlement of exiled Chagossians on the remote, underdeveloped islands of the Archipelago. While the other islands in the Chagos Archipelago have remained without any civilian infrastructure, all infrastructure development on Diego Garcia is geared to address purely military requirements. Though the issue of sovereignty is a matter of principle in its struggle against colonialism, what is of real interest for Port Louis is the economic potential of the resources that lie around the waters off Diego Garcia. As an Island, the nation's economy is largely dependent on access to marine resources. Significant economic gains could accrue if Port Louis is allowed fishing and other economic rights in the waters of the Chagos Archipelago. The prospect of gaining access to the EEZ of Chagos Archipelago would significantly shape Port Louis' policy on Diego Garcia. Additionally, there is also a convergence of interest between Mauritius' sustainable fishing capabilities and the U.K.'s capacity-building efforts in the Indian Ocean including in Blue Economy. This could be extended to the Chagos Archipelago, allowing for collaboration between Port Louis and London on Blue Economy initiatives.

Therefore, a potential solution to the issue of Chagos Archipelago perhaps lies in acknowledging Mauritius' right to the resources in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Moreover, access to some of the islands—of the 60 that comprise the Chagos Archipelago—for fishing, coconuts and other commercial activities including tourism will bring significant economic benefits to the island. The main argument for US and UK military forces has been the role of Diego Garcia in regional security (UN 2019). Furthermore, Mauritius is willing to enter into a direct agreement with the US on the Diego Garcia base—a controversial step, but a possible solution in the case of the UK's continued recalcitrance (Lederer 2019). For the US, Australia, and India, Diego Garcia's importance lies in the strategic purpose it serves in their Indian Ocean strategy rather than UK's imperial nostalgia, which seems to motivate London's stubborn refusal to part sovereignty of the islands to Mauritius.

As such, there is an opportunity for US and India to help negotiate a new agreement with Port Louis and navigate London's political stance based on its colonial history. Given Port Louis's military limitations, the security of the Chagos archipelago will naturally remain under the US purview. Mauritius' consent for US military presence on Diego Garcia would automatically secure Washington's strategic interests. Finally, partnering with India and other like-minded states could help engender greater legitimacy for US military presence in the islands.

As Mauritius and UK remain adamant about changing their respective positions, it is safe to assert that London stands to lose its international credibility while simultaneously contradicting its appeal for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific (Gladstone 2019). Until date, the UK has failed to comply with the UNGA decision, questioning the very world order it helped create post-WWII. If the UK remains adamant, it will risk losing the support of its strategic partners such as Australia and the US (Bashfield 2019). In private conversations, both US and Australian policymakers seem to agree on the need to revise the agreement given the UN resolution. Their primary concern is access to the base on Diego Garcia, rather than the veracity of the UK's sovereign claims over the islands (Bashfield 2019).

As London faces the realities of Brexit, it may be inclined to further hold on to the island territories because of their strategic importance. Although UK expected support from Delhi in the UN vote, citing primarily the China threat, it offered India no incentives. While limiting Chinese presence can be an incentive for India's mediation, access to Diego Garcia would be of even more value. Access to the strategic location and an established US naval facility in Diego Garcia will strengthen Delhi's new policy of expanding its IOR presence. The importance of Diego Garcia to Indian maritime interests is underpinned by Delhi's efforts to establish naval facilities in Mauritius territory of Agalega islands. Located 600 miles north of Mauritius, the Agalega project aims to upgrade a runway and port facilities, a development regarded as Delhi's covert attempt to build an overseas military facility in the Indian Ocean (Pilling2018). The Agalega facility will significantly boost India's position in the region allowing New Delhi to sustain and conduct extended naval operations in southwest and western Indian Ocean. However, the project has run into trouble due to domestic resistance in Mauritius (Haidar 2018). Although Delhi's Agalega project stands suspended due to domestic opposition, Delhi and Port Louis share strong political, cultural and security ties. Post-Independence, Delhi played a critical role in building the Mauritius security forces including its National Coast Guard (NCG). The India-Mauritius security relationship is so interlinked that the NCG is commanded by an Indian Naval officer seconded to Port Louis (Badri-Mahajan 2016). Similarly, officers from the Indian administrative and other services also command additional security establishments in Mauritius: in fact, the Mauritian National Security Advisor is an Indian Administrative Service officer. New Delhi, therefore, has the necessary diplomatic and material leverage to influence Mauritian thinking on the need for continuous US presence in Diego Garcia. If India and US cooperate together, Diego Garcia can become a site for joint Indo-US security presence in the Indian Ocean.

For this, three things are required. First, London should understand that it has no *locus standi* to continue its colonial legacy in Diego Garcia without making significant compromises with Port Louis. US, Australia, and India should convey this to London without hesitation. Second, Washington should be willing to engage in the Diego Garcia debate rather than leaving it completely to London. The US can help convince London to renegotiate a separate agreement with Mauritius to maintain its military presence on Diego Garcia while addressing the sovereignty dispute. Building a cooperative security framework with India and Australia over the use of the islands will provide extra legitimacy to the US presence and will also help to sell Mauritius the benefits of such a collective existence. Finally, India could help Port Louis, accept the myriad challenges it faces in securing the Chagos Archipelago and explore collaborations for sustainable development of its Blue Economy in the region. India, US, and Australia can facilitate Port Louis economic engagement with Chagos archipelago, while assisting in its maritime security requirements. Such an arrangement necessitates India's active involvement as an honest broker. On the one hand, it should steadfastly stand along with Port Louis over its sovereign claims on the islands; on the other, it should also convey to Mauritius government the logic and necessity of the US presence in Diego Garcia. These objectives are not mutually exclusive. Supporting Mauritian claims boosts India's legitimacy; New Delhi's legitimacy, in turn, increases its influence in Port Louis.

Conclusion

This article makes three major claims. First, it highlighted the triumph of realpolitik over idealist streaks in Indian foreign policy regarding Diego Garcia. From the very beginning, India condoned US naval presence in the Indian Ocean even when it publicly supported the return of the islands to Mauritius. Second, though New Delhi was concerned about the Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War, the contemporary Chinese threat is qualitatively different in both its intentions and intensity. The source of Chinese power today is not ideological but materiel in nature, built upon the latter's vastly superior economic and military wherewithal. New Delhi, therefore, cannot possibly balance China on its own neither can it afford like-minded friendly powers to leave the region. Decision-makers in New Delhi have to work towards a pragmatic resolution of the dispute, which not only caters to the demands of Mauritian sovereignty but also ensures a healthy balance of power in the region. To effectuate such a policy, the US and India should directly engage with Port Louis.

Notes

1. The theory remained prevalent in the naval circles even when ignored by the political authorities. In fact, in 1969, a study conducted by junior naval officers titled 'power vacuum in the Indian Ocean' was published in the official journal of the navy's supply and secretariat school. For more see Chaudhary (1995, 61). Details can also be found in Dutta (1969, 105–107). The Indian Army considered the report 'notorious' and influenced by a 'colonial mindset' (Palit 1969; Thomas 1975, 505).
2. For detailed analysis on China's numerous infrastructure projects, see, China Power Team. 2019. "How will the Belt and Road Initiative advance China's interests?" *China Power*. May 8, 2017. Updated October 18, 2019, available <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.
3. For isolationism as US Grand Strategy see Posen and Ross (1996).
4. India's response to the Chinese presence began gaining marginal traction in 2014. It was not until 2016 that Delhi began an active maritime partnership. For instance, the U.S. and India issued a joint vision on maritime security in 2015 but made a difference between Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean, indicating different trends in the Indian Ocean. India's joint statement and speeches increasingly began using Indo-Pacific from 2016 onwards, an indication that Delhi and its maritime partners now face the same challenges- rise of a new China. See MEA (2015b); see also Watson (2016).
5. The Indian Navy classifies the South China Sea as a secondary area of interest. See Indian Navy (2015).
6. In conversations with Indian Naval officials (some now retired), there has been larger consensus that Chinese will not threaten India in the Indian Ocean simply because they are weaker in the region. Until approx. 2014 Indian Naval officers had been certain of its strength, influence, and capability in the Indian Ocean although the Navy has consistently monitored developments. For difference in opinion within the Indian naval community, see Conference proceedings of Institute of Chinese Studies (2018).
7. Based on the authors conversation with Naval officers and policymakers in India and the U.S. This is drawn from a larger project on maritime security and strategic islands.
8. This concern has also been voiced by British policymakers during private conversations in New Delhi, especially in the months leading to the Vote in May 2019 and before the UN deadline in November 2019.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Darshana M. Baruah is a nonresident scholar with the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Baruah is also currently a visiting fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo, where she is working on a book about the significance of strategic islands in the Indian Ocean region. She can be reached at baruahdarshana@gmail.com.

Yogesh Joshi is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He was previously a MacArthur and Stanton Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University. He can be reached at yogeshjoshi@nus.edu.sg

ORCID

Yogesh Joshi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9761-8031>

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