

# Power games and their history in the Indian Ocean: A Mauritian perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the situation of Mauritius in the post-colonial geopolitical configuration of the Indian Ocean. The island nation, a former British colony that has been independent since 1968, is today confronted with geopolitical issues that place it within a dilemma. Its recent allegiance with India, through preferential trade partnership, makes claiming sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago which was part of its territory before independence complicated. There is an ongoing conflict with Great Britain and, indirectly, the United States on this contentious issue. At the same time, Mauritius needs to consider China's influence in the region since it partners with most of the independent na-

tions on matters of economic development. Mauritius itself has established an important trading platform through Chinese assistance. Concurrently, the Mauritian relationship with the United States cannot be compromised as it has been the major trading partner since 1794 with an embassy established in 1968. Hence, trapped between economic ties from all the partners engaged in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius strives to maintain its neutrality, while also being obliged to accept that its location, size and influence might not be enough to contest against past and emerging superpowers. To this end, the power games remain as complex as ever in the Indian Ocean when seen from a Mauritian perspective.

**Key words:** Geopolitics; Mauritius; Indian Ocean; power game; India; China.

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## La historia de los juegos de poder en el océano Índico: una perspectiva mauriciana

### RESUMEN

Este artículo discute la situación de Mauricio en la configuración geopolítica poscolonial del océano Índico. Este Estado insular fue primero una colonia británica y obtuvo su independencia en 1968. En esa época, el archipiélago de Chagos, que hacía parte del territorio de la isla, fue extirpado de Mauricio. Después de la independencia, Mauricio se enfrentó continuamente a la Guerra Fría entre Occidente y la antigua Unión Soviética, al tiempo que pedía la descolonización del archipiélago sobre el cual Mauricio afirma tener soberanía. En el contexto actual, existe una nueva configuración geopolítica que ha visto el surgimiento de países en desarrollo como China e India como nuevas naciones emergentes que buscan ejercer influencia tanto militar como económica en la región. En lo que concierne a China, hay un gran avance con el desarrollo del Cinturón Marítimo de la Seda, mientras India persigue el sueño de mantener el poder en un océano que lleva su nombre. Desde la perspectiva mauriciana, aún queda el objetivo de terminar con la descolonización de Chagos, mientras se enfrenta a la influencia de las nuevas potencias que dominan el contexto geopolítico actual. También existe el problema para Mauricio de mantener lazos políticos con potencias emergentes como China e India, al tiempo que mantiene sus relaciones históricas con Occidente. El nuevo paradigma, en con-

secuencia, establece un argumento complejo en la nueva configuración geopolítica.

**Palabras clave:** geopolítica; Mauricio; océano Índico; juegos de poder; India; China.

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean, spanning from the Eastern coast of Africa to the shores of Australia and Indonesia, has been under focus regarding power games from the established superpowers, the United States and Russia (ex-USSR), and new, powerful entrants, namely China and India. Geopolitical issues have shifted from the dominance of former powers to the increasing interest of the emerging powers that aim to assert their dominance in the global scene today. China has a keen interest in developing maritime ports and infrastructure to position itself strategically in the region and, more importantly, use this area to expand its maritime Silk Route Initiative. India, on the other hand, considers the Indian Ocean, bearing its patronym, as the ocean where it should extend its influence under the current Narendra Modi regime.

From this standpoint, the power games in play are changing by shifting from the bipolar influence of the United States and Russia to an incipient influence of China and India. In this scenario, Mauritius stands at a crossroads as its population is made up largely of migrants from India and China, and where economic ties are bound by ancestral and historical ties. It has maintained a neutral position as a non-aligned nation but is condemned to maintain economic ties with the United States, its main export market. Concurrently, Mauritius claims

its sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago located in the middle of the Indian Ocean where it confronts both Great Britain and the USA, with support in this intense debate and conflict coming from India.

This paper aims to explain the current situation from a historical perspective and highlight the geopolitical imbroglio of Mauritius as a small island nation aiming to maintain its integrity as an independent state, while also being capable of exploiting the Indian Ocean as a major economic zone. At the same time, the complex geopolitical moves of China and India which might oppose those of the USA, urge the need for Mauritius to maintain an equilibrium between claiming sovereignty over islands that belonged to it historically

and preserving neutrality in order to reduce political tensions among the nations contending military dominance in the Indian Ocean.

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

It would first be important to provide readers and prospective researchers with an overview of the Indian Ocean before proceeding with the issue of geopolitics.

The Indian Ocean is the third largest of the world's six ocean divisions and contains 70,560,000 km<sup>2</sup> or 19.8% of the Earth's surface water. It is bounded by Asia to the north, Africa to the west and Australia to the east. To the south, it is bounded by the Southern Ocean (Meriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022).

**Map 1.**  
**Map of the Indian Ocean**



Source: Radio France International (2020).

The Indian Ocean has been known by its present name since at least 1515, when the use of the Latin form “Oceanus Orientalis Indicus” can be proven, borrowing from the name of India, which projects into it. It was previously known as the Eastern Ocean, a term that was still in use during the mid-18th century (Harper Douglas, 2022).

In general, countries located in the ocean are best described as Indian Ocean islands, while African countries, India, Malaysia, and Australia form part of the Indian Ocean Rim, an association of Indian Ocean member nations. Thus, island nations like Sri Lanka (south of India), Zanzibar (off the east coast of Tanzania), Seychelles (halfway across the Indian Ocean) and countries in the southwestern Indian Ocean such as Madagascar, Mauritius, Rodrigues, Comoros, Mayotte, and Reunion Island, can be understood as the main Indian Ocean populations.

### **STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER**

The objective of this paper is to explain the current geopolitical movements in the Indian Ocean from the Mauritian point of view. First, a brief account of the power games in the region is given by examining the various powers that were interested in conquering this area. Following this, the geopolitical configuration of the Indian Ocean is explained by the predominance of England and France during the last centuries.

The Cold War period was both a pre- and post-colonial issue for Mauritius which claimed the Indian Ocean to be a zone of

peace, free from militarisation and nuclear influence.

The present-day focus of this paper will explore the new paradigm unfolding in the international framework resulting from the growing influence of China and India in the region and their respective strategies of influence and domination. Mauritius, taking a neutral stance, has to adapt to, and bear with, the new configuration to navigate through the complexity of geopolitics in a post-colonial and neoliberal trade context.

### **EARLIER POWER GAMES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

The issue of power games in the Indian Ocean is not a novel concept. The historical perspective needs to be briefly described to portray the degree to which colonial powers influenced trade and control over the islands. The times of colonisation date back to the last three centuries and not a single island was spared. That being said, the Indian Ocean has been an arena for new encounters, discoveries and exchanges. The Arabs and Phoenicians are considered to be the first generation of people who moved into the Indian Ocean region. As they moved to different countries propping up the Indian Ocean, they also stopped at islands that had not been discovered before. According to Chateau (2014), Arab trade in the Indian Ocean was mostly peaceful and uncontested during the medieval period, therefore the Arabs did not feel the need to establish military strongholds or a physical presence in Mauritius or other neighbouring islands. The Arabs brought

Islamic culture to neighbouring countries in the eastern and southern part of the Indian Ocean. The Swahili language and Islamic culture were passed on to islands like Comoros and Zanzibar. Beaujard (2015) argues that the rise of Swahili city-state culture has led to an increasing integration of peripheral regions of the African coast into the world-system. New coastal settlements are appearing in the Comoros and Madagascar, linked to the African coast.

The Portuguese and Dutch had to round the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa because no maritime route had been developed between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. At the turn of the 16th century, the arrival of the Portuguese on East African coasts and in the Indian Ocean prefigured the advent of profound changes in existing trans-regional social and commercial networks (Roque, 2017). Such a long and tedious journey might not have met the expansion needs of these two former colonial powers. Szczepanski (2019) points out that Portuguese sailors under Vasco da Gama (c. 1460-1524) rounded the southern tip of Africa and ventured into new seas. Rather than incorporating themselves into the existing business model, as the Portuguese had done, the Dutch sought a total monopoly on lucrative spices like mace and nutmeg.

### **BRITISH AND FRENCH INFLUENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

Alongside the Portuguese and the Dutch who were interested making advances in the Indian Ocean region, England and France set

out to conquer the world and could not avoid entering the zone. The British had long since conquered some important parts of Asia and Africa and wanted to take advantage of existing trade routes to consolidate their presence in strategic locations. Much of Africa was under British rule, from Egypt and Tanzania to the former Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa. The arrival of the British certainly disrupted traditional African culture and ways of life. This deepened the gap between African chiefs and their people, but changed African economies and made them dependent on trade with Britain (National Archives, 2020).

In a similar vein to the British philosophy of conquering countries to adhere to Queen Victoria's desire that *Rule Britannia* would sound to the ends of the earth, the French also went to conquer as many places as they could. According to Cormack (1997), this perception of geography provided scholars with a sense of English superiority and potential hegemony, as well as examples of the heroic exploits of those champions of English expansion who had preceded them.

French influence was also important to the region as they yearned to conquer islands in the same way as the British. Mulayim (2017) comments that the colonies made important contributions to France and while the French have lost many, they did not want to give up their privileges in the context of political, cultural, economic, and military relations. France continued thereafter to maintain exceptional relations, in particular with the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

### **INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM: WHERE IS THE LINE OF DEMARCATION?**

All Indian Ocean islands gained independence after World War II. Madagascar was liberated from French rule while Mauritius and the Seychelles became independent in 1968 and 1976 respectively and became members of the Commonwealth (Indian Ocean.com, 2020).

With regards to cultural imperialism, it is clear that the independence acquired by most countries freed them from colonial domination, although the main languages remain French, in Madagascar and Reunion, while English is the official language in Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Mauritius became a member of the Commonwealth in 1968 and carved its own way as a newly independent nation. From what was then a novel perspective, the country had to witness the Cold War already taking place in the Indian ocean waters,

### **MAURITIUS WITHIN A COLD WAR CONTEXT IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

World War II is considered the bloodiest war in modern history which claimed the lives of 80 million civilians. Although there was a period of national reconstruction after this major episode, it led to the Cold War that developed between the former Soviet Union and the United States. As the Soviets tightened their grip on Eastern Europe, the United States embarked on a policy of containment to prevent the spread of Soviet and Communist influence into Western European countries (JFK Library, 2022). During this period submarines moved

on the bottoms of the different seas of the world and the Indian Ocean was no exception. Submarines moved across the ocean and became a major concern for the reigning forces, the United States and the former USSR, which developed as two superpowers.

The United States considered this region to be of strategic importance because it could view the former Soviet Union from a good vantage point. The US administration established a naval base at Diego Garcia which is part of the Chagos Archipelago. Diego Garcia is the largest of 55 islands and was separated by the UK from its colonies of Seychelles and Mauritius to create the British Indian Ocean Territory in 1965 (Herzinger, 2021). These groups of islands were exempted when Mauritius gained independence in 1968. Built by the British in 1970, Diego Garcia Air Base was originally designed as part of a Cold War move to counter Soviet aggression in the Indian Ocean (Koontz, 2021). However, it was a compromise where independence was tied to Mauritius and the possibility of establishing a naval base became a reality for the United States which also had its presence in the Pacific region, namely the Mariana Islands.

For the former Soviet Union, this condition posed a major threat as it found its sternest enemy on its doorstep. Leonid Brezhnev developed ties with large developing countries like China and India and wanted the former Soviet Union to maintain its influence in the Indian Ocean by finding allies like Madagascar and the Seychelles. Zwicewicz (2019) states that from the 1950s to the 1990s, events such as the decline of colonialism and the rise of independence, numerous political upheavals,



coups, and the rise of violent conflict on the continent provided many opportunities to the Soviet Union and their influence on the continent through economic and political initiatives.

### **MAURITIUS AMID INFLUENCES IN THE COLD WAR**

The Mauritian position was quite different as it emerged as a new nation after nearly two centuries of British colonialism while still leaning on the side of the western world since it had strong trade ties with Europe and the United States. Battersby (1987) stated that although Mauritius is officially non-aligned, its cultural ties with France, India and Britain remained dominant. It also had trade relations with then apartheid-dominated South Africa, with which it traded tea, its second most important export. Battersby (1987) further pointed out that despite growing international pressure for sanctions against South Africa, Mauritius, which formally opposed apartheid, had no intention of cutting its ties economic with Pretoria.

Madagascar or the Malagasy Republic, although heavily influenced by French imperialism in the near past, was leaning towards the communist system favoured by its president Didier Ratsiraka. He quickly advocated for Leninist “scientific socialism”, in which a strong and armed administration leads the social revolution (Marcus, 2004). The same situation prevailed in the Seychelles where President Albert René led a one-party system during his reign, with most influence coming from the former Soviet Union. After the 1977

military coup, a one-party state was institutionalised under which there were no-choice elections, and civil and political liberties were suppressed (Franda, 1982). In this strategic game, Mauritius has remained the most open to the Western style of democracy which has been favoured by the United States and Western Europe. Réunion Island was a considered another ally of the West, given that it was, and remains, under the control of the French government.

The Indian Ocean islands have all faced some degree of communist influence through the global notoriety of leaders like Fidel Castro, Che Guevara Brezhnev, Marshal Tito, and other notable leaders like Samora Machel, Nelson Mandela, and Joseph Kenyatta among others. These personalities had a real influence on the politicians on the rise at that time. McDevitt (2018) points out that the Soviet Union’s decision to deploy what has become a substantial naval presence in the Indian Ocean was also greatly facilitated by the fact that the region was already plagued by anti-Western and anti-imperialist ideals.

The Cold War led to the militarisation of the Indian Ocean, with submarines being equipped with missiles and sophisticated equipment. Diego Garcia had become an important naval base for the Americans who used this location to help countries in different wars. There was also an imminent nuclear threat in the Indian Ocean. Brewster (2015) pointed out that while the world focused on the dangers that a nuclear-armed Iran could present in the Middle East, potentially more dangerous and unstable nuclear proliferation has been occurring in the Indian Ocean.

The strategic position of the United States in the Indian Ocean had been decisive for the American administration. The nearly four-decade-long war in Afghanistan, including the invasion of Iraq from 2003, depended heavily on Diego Garcia as an important military base to send armaments and supplies to the US military. The iconic WWII B52 aircraft were also used during the US-Iraq conflict. Conde (1991) mentioned that since the start of the Persian Gulf War on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1991, B-52s based in the Gulf region and at an American base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean hammered the Iraqi Republican Guard elite troops entrenched in occupied Kuwait.

The Cold War saw submarine movements on the Indian Ocean floor. At the time of their dominance, Russian submarines were located in the Indian Ocean. Friedman (2019) stated that although sea-based attack forces were dwarfed by their land-based counterparts, their existence forced the Soviets to extend their strategic defences over much wider areas. These were also combined with the illegal fishing practiced by the Russians. The Japanese have also benefited from the exploitation of maritime exclusive economic zones shared between Mauritius, the Seychelles and the Maldives. Until recently, the delimitation of these maritime zones allowed the various island nations to have more surveillance and sovereignty in these areas where illegal fishing from foreign countries could be prohibited. Potgieter (2012) states that the Indian Ocean region is known for its complex sub-regional geopolitical and geostrategic associations, while cooperation mainly occurs in the spheres

of economy and trade, rather than security, and is to a large extent hampered by distrust and lack of interaction.

#### **MAURITIAN CLAIM FOR SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE CHAGOS**

A significant area of concern regarding the Indian Ocean stems from the various disputes that have existed over the years in the region. From a Mauritian perspective, there are contentious issues regarding Mauritius' role and influence in the region.

The Chagos Archipelago is involved in one of the major disputes Mauritius currently has with its former colonial power, the United Kingdom. In 1965, Britain leased Diego Garcia and other islands of the Chagos Archipelago to the US government for 50 years (Cultural survival, 2020). Since its independence in 1968, the Chagos Archipelago has been appropriated from Mauritius and considered part of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), an exclusive maritime zone for England. This designation is not approved by the Mauritian government. Mills and Butchard (2021) state that the UN General Assembly passed a resolution which sided with Mauritius and called on the UK to end its administration of BIOT within six months. The inhabitants of Chagos were forced to leave their native islands and were mainly deported to Mauritius with a lower number to the Seychelles. This situation alienated the Chagossians who saw it as a grave injustice for which there has been little compensation given to some 3,000 islanders, with the younger generation shipped off to Crawley, England (Demetriadi, 2017).



The bleak fate of the Chagossians was expressed internationally at the International Court of Arbitration in The Hague, The Netherlands, where a resolution was passed in favour of Mauritian sovereignty over the islands. Bowcott (2019) mentioned that although the majority of the decisions made at the International Court of Justice are only advisory, the unambiguous clarity of the judges' pronouncement deals a humiliating blow to Britain's prestige on the world stage. The issue is still ongoing that the UK is overlooking the verdict.

More territorial issues in the Indian Ocean involving Mauritius relate to the dual use of the Saya de Malha Bank for fishing alongside the Seychelles as this has been a contentious issue in the past. Mauritius and the Seychelles have individual or joint jurisdiction over the waters and the entire seabed of the shelf (Convention for Biological Diversity, 2015). Another concern has been the demarcation of marine territory between Mauritius and the Maldives. Moreover, after a long debate concerning the ownership of the island of Tromelin, a fishing bank on the northeast coast of Madagascar, dual administration with the French is currently in place.

#### **MAURITIAN DESIRE FOR A ZONE OF PEACE IN THE COLD WAR**

The question of whether the Indian Ocean will be demilitarised or remain a peaceful arena remains highly debatable at a time when armed conflicts could break out at any time and without prior warning. This is the real case in the current Ukraine-Russia war. Tensions in Asia

across borders are still evident with military conflicts on the Indo-Pakistan border. The same goes for surveillance in the line of control areas of China and India. In Eastern and Southern Africa, tribal tensions often bubble over. These conflict zones apparently need the support of the military powers, either in the form of military assistance or through arms sales, for example, France recently sold several fighter jets to India for a substantial price. Mukhopadhyay (2020) comments that within this power struggle which has successfully manifested itself around the Indian Ocean between the great powers of India-USA and on the other hand China, the other factor in the equation that was successfully added by the United States to mitigate China's assertion was another rising Asian power – Japan.

Islands in the Indian Ocean may also need to be protected against terrorist threats and the exploitation of their maritime exclusive economic zones. The possibility of making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace remains a utopia as the presence of the USA, France and emerging powers such as India and China is increasingly felt. The suggestion of a peaceful zone in the Indian Ocean was first placed on the agenda of the General Assembly in 1971, under an item entitled "Declaration making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace". As a result of this initiative, the General Assembly adopted resolution 2832 (XXVI), whereby the Indian Ocean, within limits to be determined, together with the airspace above and the ocean floor below, has been designated forever as a zone of peace (United Nations, 1983).

Island nations like Mauritius, Madagascar, and the Seychelles are technically demili-

tarised because they don't have armies. They need the support of friendly countries to help them in case of conflict. They are in the middle of a dilemma where they need the cooperation of the United States to enforce democracy in the region and maintain trade relations on which they depend heavily. On the other hand, South-South cooperation is equally important and for this reason, all the islands are reaching out to welcome both China and India. France, meanwhile, occupies Reunion and Mayotte as its overseas departments and exercises surveillance in the South Seas with outlying islands like Kerguelen. Bolaky (2020) comments that South-South trade and investment in productive, non-oil-and-gas sectors of the blue economy driven by the private sector can be mutually beneficial for all parties.

### **THE CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL POWER GAME IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

The Cold War ended when the Berlin Wall was dismantled in 1989, allowing Eastern Europe and former pro-Russian nations to join and act as part of an enlarged European Union (Official Gazette, 2004). This condition allowed the United States to command in terms of military sovereignty globally and this was further evidenced by the split of former Soviet Union republics like Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Belarus, etc.

On the other hand, the developing world has begun to progress both economically and politically. Two large countries representing almost a fifth of the world's population have experienced unprecedented growth of around 8 to 10% since the creation of the World Trade

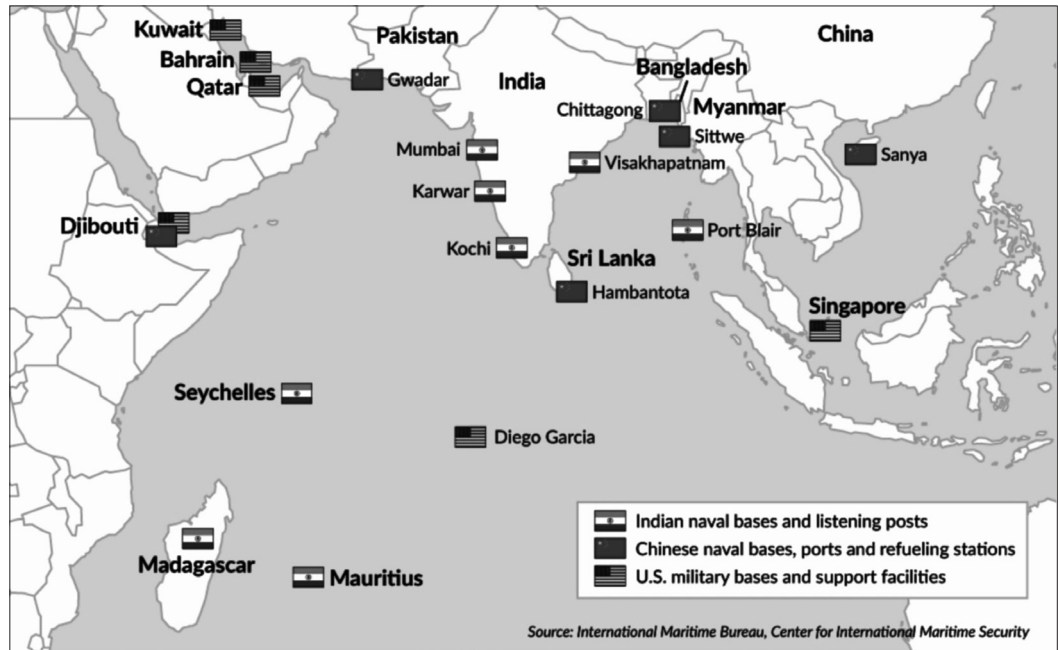
Organisation (WTO). At the time of their accession to the WTO, China and India were still lagging behind because they did not benefit from the opportunities of a much larger and deregulated world market. Bhatt et al (2006) claim, however, that India and China are becoming the economic powerhouses of the Asian region.

There could also be the issue of political leadership moving the two nations forward. Deng Xi Ping's unrivalled fist rule helped China enter the league of powerful nations of the world, followed by the rise of nationalist leader Narendra Modi in India. Far from how previously they had played timid roles of non-aligned nations, both nations aimed to become emerging powers from the new millennium onwards and become fully involved in maintaining their dominance and felt presence in the global league of nations. Chandran (2022) argued that both leaders were assertive and willing to make bold decisions, which previous leaders were either unconfident or afraid to make.

### **CHINA AND INDIA AS EMERGING POWERS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

The power game in the Indian Ocean has evolved over the years due to the emergence of China and India on a global level. The two nations have the world's largest population by country, over 2.8 billion combined in 2021 (O'Neill, 2021). Earlier in history, China and India were considered as poor countries with limited room for improvement because they depended on primary and secondary industries. They had a strong labour-intensive ag-

**Map 2.**  
**Power games in the Indian Ocean**



Source: International Maritime Bureau.

gricultural base and such industry formed the backbone of the respective economies.

Both China and India espoused political ideals based on socialism which involved the commanding role of the state over the people with the ability to look after the common welfare of the citizens. China was named the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong who ruled the economy with a strong fist and brought about the Cultural Revolution. Philipps (2016) comments that Mao saw his political campaign as a way to reinvigorate the communist revolution by strengthening ideology and eliminating opponents.

China espoused the communist system through which it succeeded in eradicating absolute poverty and bringing a degree of social justice to its citizens. Over the decades, it has forged economic ties with the former Soviet Union and pro-Communist countries.

India is by far the largest democracy in the world with a colonial legacy left by the British. After its independence in 1948, India suffered politically from the partition with Pakistan, which was part of its western state, and similarly with the independence of Bangladesh in the east in 1971.

India faced both political upheaval and famine during the first years of its independence

from the British Raj. The country has maintained its neutral position in global geopolitics as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Countries. The Non-Aligned Movement had become an effective means of promoting India's diplomatic presence and a means of obtaining international economic assistance (Clarias Team, 2022). India has, however, maintained close ties with the former Soviet Union with which it has developed commercial and political ties due to the socialist system it has adopted since its independence.

From this perspective, this paper will individually account for China's and India's interest in the Indian Ocean and how these two nations are now important players in the power game.

### **CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

China has always viewed sea lanes as a mode of communication in its international trade endeavours. It was considered the Middle Kingdom in centuries past, while it lost its power when Western nations took over global trade. Florek (2020) said the appellation implied its superior role as the centre of civilisation or even the world.

The Silk Road Initiative is one of the most important strategies developed by China to re-define its influence on a global scale. Initially, it was the region of Central Asia that needed to be the focus of infrastructure projects such as the construction of highways in order to allow China to connect to the West. This is a very ambitious project in which China has developed new collaborations with all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe who

have encouraged it to achieve its communication strategy and its ambition to become the emerging economic power. The Asian giant has also developed a maritime hub in Piraeus, Greece, to strengthen its presence in Europe.

Connecting to the African continent has been difficult as the continent does not have much infrastructural development, although China could help develop highways in several African countries through the Silk Road Initiative. According to Luckock (2016), the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is a planned maritime route with integrated port and coastal infrastructure projects from the east coast of China to Europe, India, Africa and the Pacific through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

This aspect of China's influence in Africa is made complex because India does not allow it to cross its borders. To counter this problem related to certain political conflicts between the two nations, China has developed military and maritime infrastructures in three strategic places, namely Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Djibouti (see Map 2). These naval bases allow China to circumvent its entry into India but also to demonstrate its presence in the northern region of the Indian Ocean.

China has extended its arms to many African countries. In the eastern part of Africa bordering the Indian Ocean, China has developed bilateral relations with various nations to expand its Silk Road influence in this region.

### **THE MAURITIAN POSITION WITH CHINA**

Regarding the Indian Ocean islands, Mauritius, the Seychelles and Madagascar maintain

excellent relations with China. Mauritius has an established long-term political relationship with China resulting from bilateral trade cooperation. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1972, bilateral relations have gone smoothly. Today, China is Mauritius's second largest trading partner (Rucai, 2017). The aforementioned countries also have a noticeable Chinese diaspora on Reunion and Rodrigues. The Indian Ocean islands benefit from multiculturalism and allow each community to live without borders.

Beyond China's cultural presence in the Indian Ocean, the Chinese government has provided aid to the Indian Ocean islands both financially and economically. In Mauritius, several projects have been developed by China such as the Safe City project and the construction of highways, transport, and telecommunication systems. A major smart city project named Tianli is underway in Mauritius, which is also seen as a hub for China to make inroads into the South African region where it aims to maintain its presence (Rucai, 2017).

The Indian Ocean route is important to the Chinese government as it transports its important goods to Europe traveling through the waters of the South China Sea, crossing the northern Indian Ocean region, and connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. Its presence in Africa makes it more necessary than ever for the transit of large volumes of construction infrastructure needed by African nations. At the same time, the passage through the Indian Ocean affirms the presence of China in the region. Hannah (2019) argues that China has taken a more radical approach. It geostrategically defines South Asia and the Indian Ocean

as an extension of its Maritime Silk Road, the trade and infrastructure corridor linking coastal China to other Asian countries.

Venkatasweran (2020) argues that the Indian Ocean figures prominently in China's strategic thinking. China also aims to actively participate in establishing and safeguarding the international and regional maritime order, which is a clear revelation that it does not accept the prevailing status quo. African nations have expressed that despite political disparities with China regarding its human rights policies, China, at least, is developing infrastructure that previous superpowers have not done before. Hanauer and Morris (2014) state that many African leaders hope that China will interact with them in a way that the United States and other Western governments do not – by engaging economically without patronising preaching about good governance.

#### **INDIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

India's history could have explained its earlier influence on geopolitics. Being an extension of the first human civilisation in the Indus region, Mesopotamia and adjoining regions, India is home to Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic culture. Such cultural mixing made India a major empire in the South Asian region before being successively conquered by the Mughals and Great Britain. The Mughals maintained a powerful empire for centuries and established an impressive government and social organisation by Asian standards. However, the intellectual revolution in Western Europe, the new spirit and new discoveries, and the wide dissemination of knowledge enabled England

to conquer India (Majumdar et al, 1984). After being conquered for centuries, India could not achieve the same level of expansion economically compared to China.

The naming of the Indian Ocean is based on the presence of India as the subcontinent protrudes like a peninsula into the Indian Ocean region. Previously, India's influence extended regionally westwards towards the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, and to Malaysia and Thailand in the Far East.

India's independence in 1948 was the first test to see whether the country could survive on its own economically. This in itself has been quite a tumultuous history involving making *peace* with its neighbours by engaging in the Indochina War in 1962, the Indo-Pakistani War in 1965 and 1971, as well as the partition of East Pakistan, renamed Bangladesh in 1971. Internally, India has been affected by famine, community savings, border disputes with Pakistan and China, as well as growing demography which resulted in high levels of lower-class poverty. Pokraka (2019) adds that India became a nuclear power in 1974 and Pakistan developed the same weapon in 1998.

India's desire to dominate the Indian Ocean has been evident since the arrival of the leader of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata party, Narendra Modi. In a bid to show a more powerful India, the Modi government has witnessed India's phenomenal growth over the past decades in a manner more or less similar to China. Infrastructure development, foreign direct investment, and improvement of facilities to reduce poverty have been quite marked in the Indian subcontinent.

India has also considered an expansionist policy in the region but has too often been blocked by border disputes with Pakistan and nations less welcoming of cooperation such as Bangladesh or Burma. The perception that Africa could be a pillar of India's long-term progress has gradually grown and it would be via the namesake ocean that the Great Peninsula now aims to develop. Baruah (2021) states that the Indian Navy claims the entire Indian Ocean as its area of responsibility and prides itself on being the first to respond to it in the event of natural and humanitarian disasters. Narendra Modi, as quoted by Jaisankar (2016), has asserted that India is at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean region is at the top of his political priorities.

The presence of the Americans in Diego Garcia is known to the world, as are their claims to long-term supremacy as a military power in the region. The former USSR was driven out long after the former Soviet republics split into independent states since the 1990s. China is well placed to maintain its presence with military bases in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Djibouti. India cannot remain stationary at this stage (see Map 2).

#### **THE MAURITIAN PROXIMITY TO INDIA WITHIN INDIAN OCEAN GEOPOLITICS**

India has apparently privileged its socio-cultural relations in the Indian Ocean. The population of Mauritius is made up mostly of Indian descendants, while the Seychelles also has a large population of Indian descent. India has maintained excellent economic ties with



Mauritius, and remains its most important investor in terms of foreign direct investment.

India has extended its cooperation with mainland Africa by organising summits to welcome African leaders to join Indian joint ventures. Compared to China, India is lagging behind in terms of dominance in Africa as it does not invest in infrastructure like China is able to do. Chaudhury (2022) asserts that the fundamental trait on which China and India diverge stems from their long-term goals. From the nature of the policies followed, it is evident that China seeks dominance, control, and strategic gains. India, on the other hand, aims for little more than a partnership based on equality, mutual respect, and benefits (Chaudhury, 2022). Nevertheless, India's cooperation in science, medicine, technology, and business opportunities could provide opportunities for the subcontinent to enter Africa.

Mauritius needs to play the equilibrist role here. India is financially helping Mauritius to develop mega-projects such as hospitals, modern transport systems, and cultural centres. At the same time, it receives support from the Mauritian government as India is among the major economies supporting Mauritius in its efforts to claim the Chagos Archipelago.

India's overt presence in Mauritius is reflected in the development of infrastructure for military and surveillance purposes in Madagascar, the Seychelles, and Agalega, a dependency of Mauritius. This latter issue has been the subject of controversy among members of the Mauritian National Assembly expressing their concern over the sovereignty of Mauritius with regard to the Indian military presence in the region. Bashfield (2021) states that India views

the new base as essential to facilitate aerial and surface maritime patrols in the South West Indian Ocean, and as an intelligence outpost.

As shown in Map 2, India is gaining prominence in terms of military and political strategy in the Southern Indian Ocean region, causing other powers like the United States, China, and even France to disapprove of India's presence in the region. On the other hand, the various island nations might consider this to be indicative of South-South cooperation and a "win-win" game, as India remains non-aligned in terms of political affiliation. This is where Mauritius has denied India's military presence, while Mishra (quoted in Al Jazeera) has said Agalega is an intelligence facility allowing India to organise an air and naval presence to increase surveillance in the southwest Indian Ocean and the Mozambique Channel (Al Jazeera, 2022). The proximity of the Mauritian government with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and historical bilateral trade relations between India and Mauritius only exacerbate the debate.

#### **GEOSTRATEGIC REPERCUSSIONS FOR MAURITIUS REGARDING INDIA'S MILITARY PRESENCE**

India's presence in the Indian Ocean has received greater impetus through the special relations that the Mauritian Prime Minister, Pravind Jugnauth, has with India's PM, Narendra Modi. The use of Agalega as a shipment base has sparked global debate on the proximity between the two nations, as it is perceived to be a step further towards economic cooperation. The United States is weary of such influ-

ence in the same way that it is weary of China. At the domestic level, the name ‘Little India’ that is sometimes attributed to Mauritius is not unanimously accepted among the Mauritians who are multi-racial and have ancestral origins from Africa, China, and Europe as well.

Virahsawmy (2019) argues that neoliberal and fascist India will try to spread its tentacles to grab the resources found in Africa and is using Mauritius to attain its objectives. Bashfiel (2021) adds that parallels with the Chagossian experience—a people forcibly removed from the Chagos Archipelago in the early 1970s to make way for the joint UK-US military base on Diego Garcia—sound alarms for ethnic Creole Agaléens and their supporters.

In a nutshell, the proximity of Mauritius with India has been exacerbated by a scandal concerning a survey conducted by Indians regarding cable communications and Internet service. This was viewed as ‘sniffing for’ secrets from Mauritians by local critics. Without a doubt, the situation needs to be remedied.

#### **WHAT MAURITIUS EXPECTS TO GAIN FROM CHINESE COOPERATION**

The China-Mauritius Free Trade Agreement came into place in 2019. Covering trade in goods, in services, as well as investment protection matters, such cooperation seeks to achieve the goal of a comprehensive, high-level, and mutually beneficial partnership.

Through the FTA, Mauritius-based businesses are able to access a huge market of 1.4 billion people, providing a welcome boost to enterprises engaged in the export of sugars, rum, black tea, tuna, horticultural products,

processed food, handicrafts, high-end textiles and apparels, cut diamonds, etc. The China-Mauritius FTA, by raising the competitiveness of Mauritian products by using Chinese-sourced components in their value chain, will boost their export potential in other markets (DTOS, 2019). Additionally, the FTA further provides new opportunities for Mauritius to grow its important tourism sector and transform itself into a shopping paradise for visitors from Africa, Asia, and other Indian Ocean islands.

With regards to trade in goods, Mauritius would benefit from immediate duty-free access in the Chinese market to some 7,504 tariff lines. In addition, a Tariff Rate Quota for 50,000 tonnes of sugar will be implemented on a progressive basis over a period of 8 years with an initial quantity of 15,000 tonnes (Economic Development Board, 2020).

#### **WHAT MAURITIUS EXPECTS TO GAIN FROM INDIAN COOPERATION**

Regarding economic ties from India, Mauritius has signed off high-impact community development projects (HICDP). The projects under this bilateral agreement relate primarily to socio-economic development, particularly the creation of infrastructure in the education, basic healthcare, and community development sectors. Livelihood activity, skill development, renewable energy, conservation of environmental and cultural heritage, empowerment of women and child welfare, and disaster risk reduction, shall be the primary interests of such projects (NDTV, 2022).

According to Chaudhury (2022), a social housing project has recently been included as one of the five high-profile infrastructure projects identified for implementation under the \$353 million Special Economic Package (SEP) extended to the Government of Mauritius (GOM) in 2016. The Civil Service College would be set up under a memorandum of understanding signed between India and Mauritius through assistance grants of \$4.74 million. An 8 MW Solar PV Farm project at Tamarind Falls, Henrietta was financed under a loan of contract (LOC) of \$500 million in 2017. The project comprises installation of 25,000 Photovoltaic cells to generate approximately 14 GWh of green energy annually, to provide power to approximately 10,000 households (Chaudhury, 2022).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the current context, Mauritius is expected to nurture its economic and political ties with the new entrants in Indian Ocean geopolitics, namely China and India. These are also countries with which Mauritius has ancestral ties based on immigration from both nations and political ties that date back over 50 years. Mauritius has extended its relations by signing new commercial treaties with both growing powers in the region. There is a free economic zone that has been developed by China while India has greatly aided Mauritius in designing and building new infrastructure. Mauritius has the obligation to keep its excellent relations with these two nations steady.

Secondly, Mauritius cannot shift its interests to solely focus on China and India. Being

a non-aligned and neutral country, Mauritius must continue its cooperation with former powers like Great Britain, France, and the United States. It must, on one hand, maintain its effort for sovereignty over the Chagos while, on the other hand, entertain good relations with its earlier trade partners. This equilibrist role is essential as former allies would not approve of Mauritius approaching China and India to their detriment. It is also clear that Great Britain, France, and the United States still offer Mauritius its greatest share for the exports of its goods and services.

Thirdly, Mauritius has witnessed all forms of conquest and as a result of being independent, stands as an important player in modern geopolitics in the Indian Ocean. As a non-aligned nation within the Commonwealth and regional associations, the island nation must lobby for a nuclear-free and peaceful Indian Ocean zone, an argument which still remains unanswered as the power games in the region shift from a few older powers to a wider club comprising many new players.

## CONCLUSION

Power games in the Indian Ocean date from the eighteenth century when early powers such as Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands set out to conquer the world and stretch their influence as far as they could explore. Travel by sea allowed for expeditions of discovery followed by the colonisation of these new worlds. The Indian Ocean, owing to its sheer enormity, became a power game for the Portuguese and the Dutch who were later joined by the British and the French to fight for the right to colonisa-

tion once-free nations. After the Second World War, the prominence of the United States and Russia changed the geopolitical framework. Nowadays, it is the coming up to two emerging powers namely China and India who are upsetting the status quo.

This paper has attempted to present the issue of modern geopolitics in the Indian Ocean region through a historical perspective. Being strategically located in the world and part of the maritime space that supports Africa, Asia, and Australia, the Indian Ocean has been a major transit point for shipping vessels for regional trade and has always received a high level of attention and concern from various superpowers. Although exclusive economic zones allow an island nation like Mauritius to exercise sovereignty in the region, the impending threat of power games in the Indian Ocean region confirms a new configuration in the history of the seas is likely to prevail.

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