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THE MOZAMBIQUE CHANNEL: FROM ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO RENEWED STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE FOR INDIA'S MARITIME INTERESTS AND LITTORAL PARTNERSHIP

DR GARIMA KUMAWAT



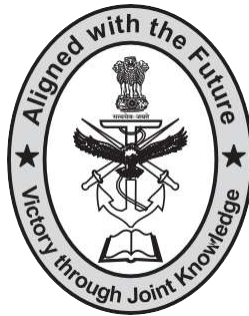
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Room No 301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan,
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road
New Delhi –110003 (INDIA)

Telephone Nos: 011-24364881,
24366485

Fax: 011-24366484

Website: www.cenjows.in

E-mail: cenjows@cenjows.in

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301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt. Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan CGO Complex,
Lodhi Road
New Delhi-110003

Editor : Maj Gen (Dr) Ashok Kumar, VSM (Retd) (dg@cenjows.in)

Deputy Editor : Dr Ulupi Borah, Distinguished Fellow
(distinguishedfellow1@cenjows.in)

Editorial Board :

Brig K Ranjeev Singh, YSM (ddg@cenjows.in)
Col Ajay Kumar Rajak, SM
(secy@cenjows.in)
Gp Capt Ashish Kumar Gupta (Retd)
(seniorfellow2@cenjows.in)
Dr Ulupi Borah, Distinguished Fellow
(distinguishedfellow1@cenjows.in)
Dr Monojit Das, Senior Fellow, PRO
(monojit.das@cenjows.in)

301, B-2 Wing, 3rd Floor
Pt. Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road
New Delhi-110003

Publication Head : Ms Vaibhavi Katal

All correspondence may be addressed to:

Editor
Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS) 301, B-2 Wing, 3rd
Floor
Pt Deendayal Antyodaya Bhawan CGO Complex, Lodhi
Road
New Delhi-110003
Telephone: (91-11) 24366485/Telefax: (91-11) 24366484 e-mails:
cenjows@cenjows.in / cenjows@yahoo.com Website: <http://cenjows.in>

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FOR INDIA'S MARITIME INTERESTS AND LITTORAL
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CENJOWS

The Mozambique Channel: From Alternative Route to Renewed Strategic Significance for India's Maritime Interests and Littoral Partnership



Dr Garima Kumawat is a Senior Fellow at CENJOWS

Introduction

The Mozambique Channel constitutes one of the three principal western entry points to the Indian Ocean, alongside the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. The concurrent crises at these two northern chokepoints have exposed how vulnerable India's energy and trade transits are to any disruptions in and around them. This has created a renewed sense of urgency and focus on the Mozambique Channel, as a significant amount of maritime traffic and trade has been redirected to the longer route through this Channel in the Southwestern Indian Ocean (SWIO) and around the Cape of Good Hope. This phenomenon is not new, as is evident through the Red Sea disruption in 2023.

Over the course of a millennium, this channel has acted as an essential transit corridor, connecting the Indian Ocean with the global maritime transit networks. India too recognises the importance of this channel and demarcated it as a primary area of interest in its maritime security strategy. Nevertheless, such crises underscore the necessity of transforming this recognition into deeper and more sustained

commitments. This region is not just a transit corridor, but its littoral states provide huge gas reserves along with critical minerals, fisheries, and port access linked with India's future energy security and sustained growth. India has engaged in long-term investments and defence cooperation throughout the region; however, these efforts remain predominantly skewed and small in scale. This is attributable to factors such as geographical distance, stalled projects, regional insurgency, weak maritime governance, and competition for resources among extra-regional powers.

Securing this supply chain and vital transit route demands robust bilateral and multilateral engagement with key littoral states – Mozambique, Tanzania, Madagascar, the Comoros, and France. This paper assesses the importance of the Mozambique Channel and its evolving geopolitical weight for India while balancing its long-term dependence on the northern chokepoints. The paper also examines India's existing stakes, partnerships, connectivity, security risks and naval reach in the Mozambique Channel to shape India's options and opportunities for the future. It also focuses on how India can engage with these countries to forge a robust defence and mutually beneficial economic collaboration towards a more resilient, sustained and long-term presence in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIO) as a preferred security provider.

Geographical location of the Channel

The Mozambique Channel is an elongated, north-south-oriented basin on the eastern coast of Africa in the SWIO, with the Cape of Good Hope in the south, and the Horn of Africa in the north, lying between Mozambique to the west and Madagascar to the east. To the north of the channel are the Comoros, a group of three islands – Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Mohéli-and the Seychelles Islands. Numerous islands administered by France are located across the channel, including Mayotte, Europa, Juan de Nova, Glorieuses and Bassas Da India (Map 1). The channel serves as a southwest entry point from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, establishing a connection to the Arabian Sea to the north. The total length of the channel is approximately 1,000 nautical miles (NM), which is equivalent to roughly 1,669 kilometres, and it measures around 230 NM in width at its narrowest point. The maximum water depth varies from 2700 metres in the northern regions to 5000 metres in the southern areas.¹ In the northern region, it extends from the

estuary of the Rio Rovuma in northern Mozambique to Ras Habu on Grande Comore Island in the Comoros and further to Cap d'Ambre, the northern tip of Madagascar.² In the southern region, it extends from Ponta do Ouro in Mozambique to Cape Tanjon' i Vohimena in Madagascar. Geographically, it constitutes a significantly broader transit corridor when compared to the other narrow chokepoints of the Indian Ocean.

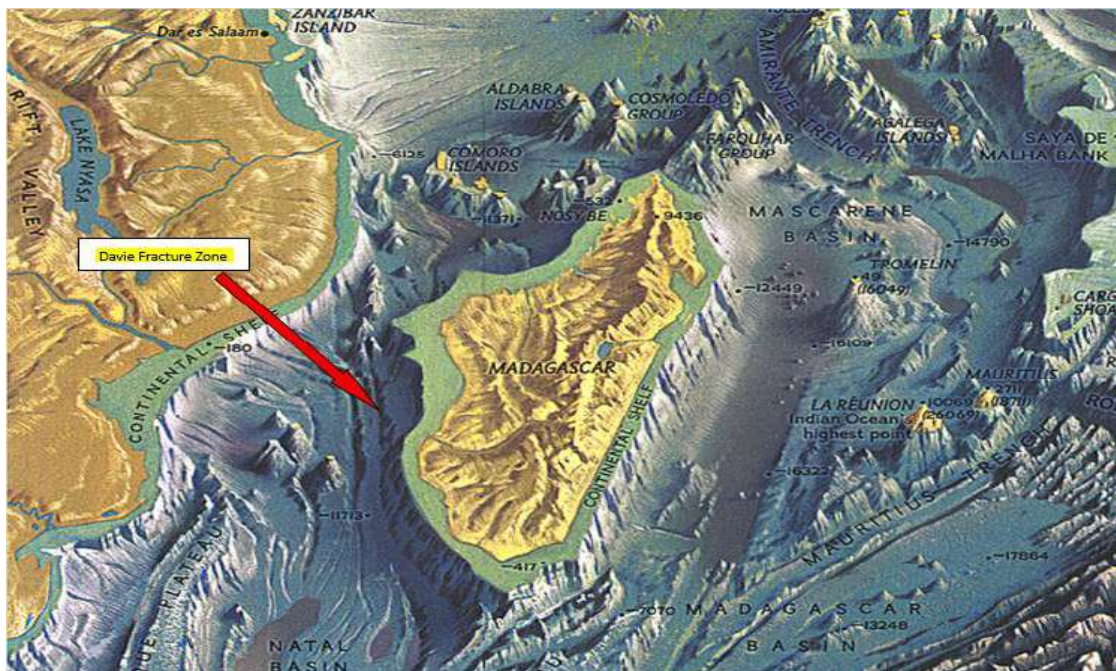
Its geological origin is attributed to the fragmentation of the Gondwana landmass during the early Jurassic period. At this time, the East Gondwana land, which included India, Madagascar, Antarctica, and Australia, began to drift away from the West Gondwana, which comprised Africa.³ This separation occurred along the Davie Fracture Zone, a transform boundary that extends along the eastern-central axis.⁴ This determined the existence of diverse underwater geological features, including the Mozambique Plateau, the Natal Basin, and several seamounts.



Map 1: Geographical location and stretch of Mozambique Channel **Source:** Authors'

Own

The continental shelf regions throughout this Channel are extensive, resulting in shallow areas that provide favourable habitats for marine biodiversity. Along with this, the channel is dominated by strong mesoscale eddy activity.⁵ It constitutes a complex circulation system of a rotating body of seawater that develops within or adjacent to a larger current system, resulting in vertical mixing of water and the redistribution of nutrients. This results in localised areas of biological productivity that contribute to the enhancement of regional fisheries productivity.

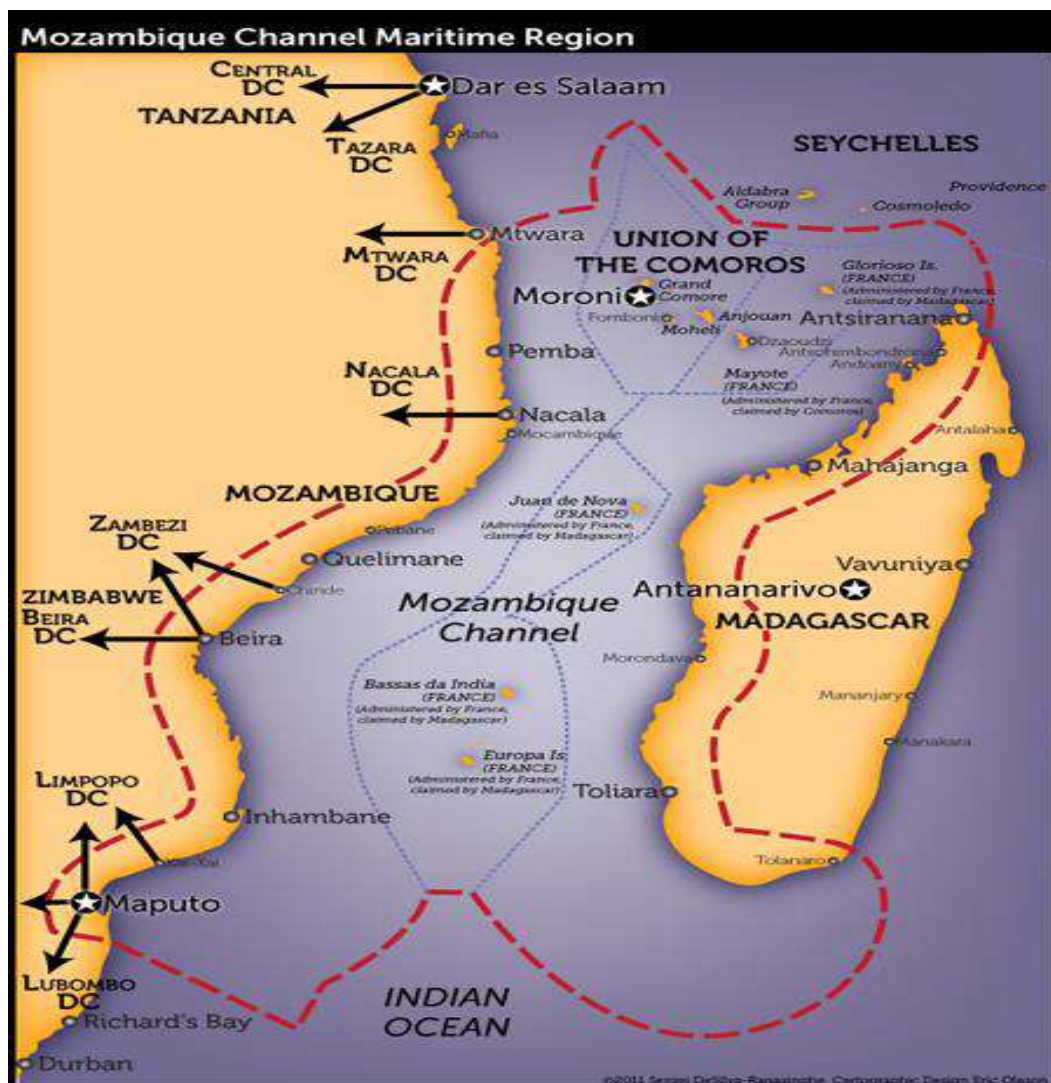


Map 2: Mozambique Channel Ocean Floor Map and Davie Fracture Zone **Source:**
Base Map - National Geographic Maps⁶; Marking by author

Maritime Zones and Boundaries

It is a relatively deep and broad maritime corridor; consequently, it lacks a Traffic Separation Scheme or a route recommended by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Although the Mozambique Channel routing scheme was proposed in 2012 by the littoral states, it faced opposition from the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS).⁷ The channel provides an alternative passage for vessels that are unable to navigate the other constricted straits surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. This channel delineates maritime space, wherein the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Tanzania, Comoros, Seychelles, Mozambique, Madagascar, and France overlap or are adjacent to each other. Tanzania, Comoros,

and Mozambique in the north reached an agreement regarding delimitation in 1988, culminating in the formal conclusion of the tripoint in 2011.⁸ However, at the centre of the channel, five French islands are currently the subject of dispute with the regional countries. Since 1972-73, Madagascar has asserted its claims over Bassas da India, Europa and Juan de Nova, a position that was endorsed by a UN General Assembly Resolution in 1979, although this endorsement does not confer binding authority. Comoros and France are engaged in a dispute over Mayotte. Although these islands encompass an area of less than 40 km², they enable France to assert ownership over more than half of the hydrocarbon resources and fisheries-rich EEZ of the Mozambique Channel.⁹ Such claims, however, are not acknowledged by the African Union and remain unresolved.



Map 3: Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of littoral states of the Mozambique Channel **Source:** Center for International Maritime Security¹⁰

Geoeconomic Importance

Unlike the eastern front, with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands acting as sentinels for India's maritime trade and security overlooking the Malacca Strait, there are no Indian territories to overlook India's maritime interests proximate to the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel connecting the Middle East, WIO, Asian markets and Europe through shipping routes. The importance of this route transiting through the Mozambique Channel has resurfaced in the current conflicts in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

The commercial and oil tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has plunged by roughly 90% following the US-Israel conflict with Iran by March 2026.¹¹ The alternate route to supply LNG and oil was through Bab-el-Mandeb, which was again impacted following the Houthis' attacks and blockade in the Red Sea. This turned the situation into a dual chokepoint disruption, pushing major shipping companies like CMA CGM, Hapag-Lloyd, and Maersk to divert their shipment around the Cape.¹² Previously, following the Houthis' attack in November 2023 in the Red Sea, the container tonnage passing through the Suez also recorded a significant decline of 82% in February 2024, resulting in a substantial portion of trade being redirected through the African peninsula (Fig.1).¹³

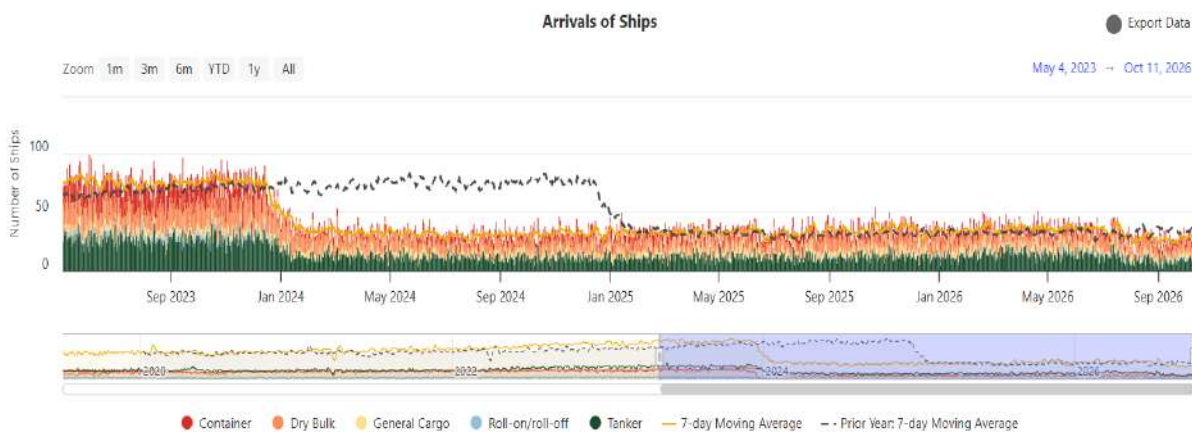


Figure 1. Declining trend of ships transiting via Bab el-Mandeb since December 2023 till present. **Source:** UN Global Platform, PortWatch¹⁴

In 2023, while the Cape of Good Hope saw an increase from 6.2 million barrels per day (mmb/d) in 2023 to 9.3 mmb/d in 2024, the volume of crude and petroleum liquids transited via Bab el-Mandeb decreased from 9.3 mmb/d in 2023 to 4.1 mmb/d

in 2024.¹⁵ The situation could be assessed through the Portwatch data on ships transiting the Cape. Ever since the 2023 Houthi attack in the Red Sea, maritime traffic has been diverted to the Cape and has increased rather than returning to pre-crisis patterns. The 2026 disruptions in Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb have further reinforced the importance of this route. The ship transits peaked at 115 a day in May 2026 and bottomed at 79 a day in Sept 2026 and averaged 89 ships per day in Sept 2026 (Fig.2).¹⁶

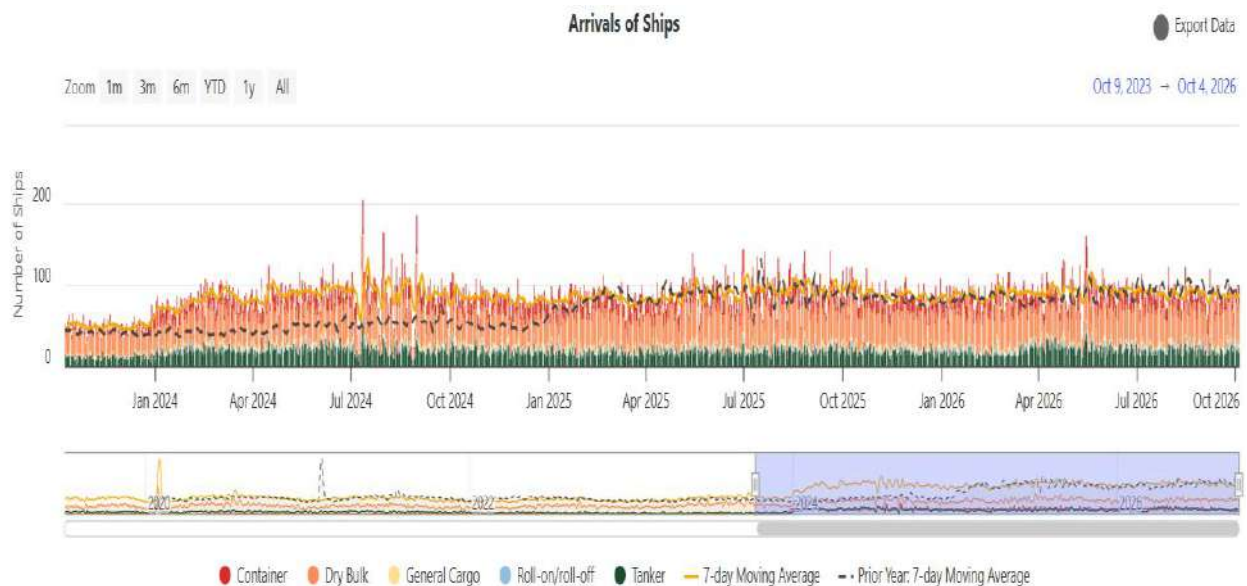


Figure 2: Increasing trend of ships transiting through the Cape of Good Hope since December 2023. **Source:** UN Global Platform, PortWatch¹⁷

Apart from the increase in trade transiting this region, the littoral of the channel also has the potential to develop into an energy hub, with abundant gas reserves and critical minerals found in the Rovuma Basin in the western part. Countries like the US, Italy, Japan, India, and South Korea have already invested in this region. On the other side, the Bemolanga deposit in western Madagascar is expected to have around 9.9 bn barrels of recoverable oil with export potential. The region being mostly underdeveloped, the challenge that lies ahead is to develop infrastructure to exploit and transport these resources.

India relied heavily on the Persian Gulf oil and LNG. However, during the crisis in Hormuz, India diversified and rerouted 70% of its crude imports away from it towards Nigeria, Angola and Latin America, which reached India via the Cape route. Much of

India's trade with these countries transits through the sea lanes passing through the Mozambique Channel.¹⁸ Further, the Western Front of the Indian Ocean provides India with access to the resource-rich African countries to secure its current and future supply chains, demarcating the importance of South WIO countries, ports and the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) associated with them. Any conflict among the states or unilateral control of the region or resources by any regional or extra-regional player, or threats from regional insurgent groups (like Ansar al-Sunna), climate change, piracy, or accidents, would not only jeopardise the security and stability of the region but would also be detrimental to India's supply chains and maritime interests.

Security Threats and Maritime Vulnerabilities

Though countries have opted for an alternate route to ensure continuity in global trade, the waters around the Mozambique Channel have their own share of threats associated with it, which could be detrimental to the maritime interests of the countries transiting or investing in this region. Most of the maritime insecurities are largely created by interstate or intra-state conflicts like insurgencies, political instability and contested sovereignty claims. Ethnic conflicts, unemployment, poverty, widespread corruption, poor law enforcement and governance, and fertile ground for extremist and Islamic jihadi groups driven by political and religious motivation are the major causes of instability in the region. For instance, the ongoing insurgency in Cabo Delgado in Mozambique that began in 2017 has claimed more than 6600 lives, has impacted millions of people and is led by the Islamic State-backed Ansar al-Sunnah (aka Al-Shabaab in Mozambique or Islamic State in Mozambique).¹⁹ In 2021, insurgents captured the port town of Palma, a crucial energy centre, and targeted an under-construction gas plant by a French company, TotalEnergies, resulting in the suspension of operations.

This highlights that unless the issue is resolved, vital infrastructure like this remains vulnerable to sabotage or terrorist attacks. Also, such an environment creates another zone of insecurity and has complete potential for spillover in the maritime domain, as evident through transnational crimes like drug trafficking, piracy incidents, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and other non-traditional security threats like attacks on shipments, accidents and oil spills reported in the

region. The region also faces climate-related disasters like severe tropical cyclones, which not only cost lives but also could lead to port closures, shipping delays, and damage to coastal infrastructure.

India's Maritime and strategic engagement with Littoral states

- **Mozambique**

With an approximate coastline of 2,770 km, Mozambique governs one of the largest EEZs in Africa, encompassing approximately 578,986 sq km.²⁰ It is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and shares maritime EEZ boundaries with Tanzania, the Comoros, France and Madagascar. This area provides it with extensive fishing grounds and environmentally sensitive marine ecosystems. More than 90% of total fish production is derived from traditional, small-scale fishing practices. The remaining portion is attributed to industrial fishing, which employs larger vessels that operate in deeper waters, primarily for export purposes. Mozambique has gained significant prominence in recent years, particularly due to the discoveries of substantial reserves of natural gas and other mineral resources in the Rovuma Basin. It is now recognised as the third-largest holder of proved natural gas reserves in Africa, following Nigeria and Algeria,²¹ with estimated reserves ranging from 125 to 130 trillion cubic feet of natural gas located off the northern coast of the country in Cabo Delgado province around Pemba, Palma, and the Rovuma River.²²

Additional significant hydrocarbon reserves encompass the Pande and Temane fields, as well as the Bonito-1 exploration well, located in the Inhambane Province in the southern part of the country.²³ The Mozambique Basin exhibits potential for the occurrence of oil; however, the density of exploratory drilling conducted to date remains low. These discoveries have resulted in increased investment in projects within this basin, leading to a significant rise in natural gas production of over 155% within a span of five years, escalating from 4.596 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2019 to 11.751 bcm in 2023.²⁴ Significant coal reserves are also present, as demonstrated by the Moatize mines located in the Central Tete province. In the year 2022,

Mozambique's total coal production amounted to approximately 14.8 million tonnes.²⁵

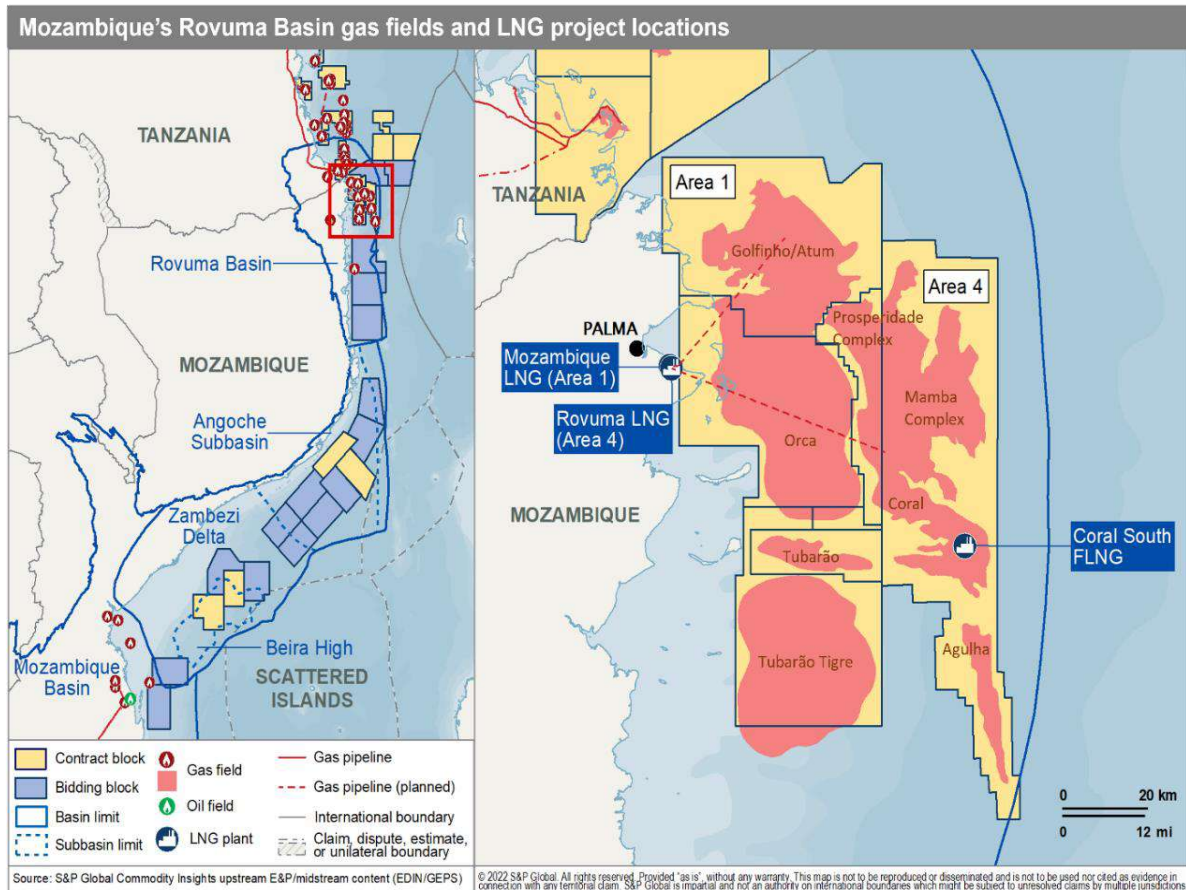
Moreover, Mozambique's extensive coastline offers substantial deposits of heavy mineral sands that are rich in titanium, ilmenite, rutile, and zircon, which possess considerable economic potential in the production of paints, plastics, coatings, titanium metal, and welding electrodes. Numerous sand extraction projects are currently being conducted in various coastal regions of the country, particularly in Nampula (Moma project) and the provinces of Gaza and Inhambane (Mutamba project), as well as in the waters of Zambezia Province.²⁶ The ports of Maputo, Beira, and Nacala, located along the Mozambique coast, serve as crucial links between the resource-rich eastern and southern African hinterland and the landlocked nations of Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Botswana, facilitating access to Asian markets. These nodes hold considerable importance for Mozambique in the flow of energy and critical mineral resources via the shipping corridors that connect diverse regions of the Indian Ocean with the Atlantic.

India's maritime interests in Mozambique are substantial. During 2025-26, it exported goods worth US\$1.50 billion, encompassing a diverse array of products, including refined petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, machinery and engineering goods, vehicles and transport equipment, electronic goods, rice and other cereals, and railway equipment, among others. Conversely, the total value of imports amounted to US\$2.29 billion, comprising mineral fuels, oils, vegetables and fruit, iron and steel, precious stones, metals and mineral/ore like titanium, aluminium, zinc and much more.²⁷ During 2024-25, India also imported 8.36 million tonnes of coking coal from Mozambique, connected to its steel sector and diversification.²⁸ More than 100 Indian companies like ICVL, RITES, Aditya Birla Group and GAIL, etc., have also expanded their footprints in Mozambique.²⁹ In addition, almost USD 10 billion has been invested by India in Mozambique.³⁰ India, through EXIM Bank, has extended its support to Mozambique by extending favourable Lines of Credit (LOC) in multiple sectors like energy production, agriculture, Information Technology, solar, and other infrastructure projects related to roads, railways,

etc.³¹³² Indian enterprises have also made investments in the natural gas and coal sectors. In March 2026, JSW Steel took over the MdR coking coal project in the Moatize coal basin, in Tete province, along with several other sub-basins, located 450 kilometres from Beira Port and 900 kilometres from Nacala Port. It can now tap the high-quality coking coal reserves of 850 mn tonnes, setting the production target at 2.4 mn tonnes per year, ensuring reliable long-term supplies essential for steel production.³³

There are two most important Mozambican areas linked to the Rovuma Basin for natural gas extraction:

- Area 1: It comprises the offshore Golfinho or Atum field of the Rovuma Basin, 40 km off Cabo Delgado, operated by France's TotalEnergies. It holds a 26.5% stake, along with Japan's Mitsui E&P with a 20% share, ENH-Mozambique at 15%, India's ONGC Videsh with 10%, Bharat Petroleum's subsidiary Bharat Petroresources Limited (BPRL) Ventures also at 10%, Beas Rovuma Energy with 10%, and PTTEP with an 8.5% stake.³⁴ It possesses an onshore LNG facility with a capacity for producing 12.88 mn tonnes per year.
- Area 4: It is operated by Mozambique Rovuma Venture (MRV), comprising Italy's Eni, the United States' ExxonMobil, and CNPC, holding a total of 70% stakes in it. This is followed by Kogas, ENH, and Galp, with each having a 10% stake.³⁵



Map 4: Mozambique's Rovuma Basin Gas Field and LNG Project Location Source: S&P Energy³⁶

Nevertheless, a significant portion of Rovuma gas remains undeveloped, mainly because of high development costs and the challenges of deep-water conditions. Furthermore, projects experienced major delays due to the insurgency in Cabo Delgado since 2017, along with attacks on Palma, which culminated in TotalEnergies declaring force majeure in 2021. In January 2026, TotalEnergies and the Mozambican government announced the revival of all onshore and offshore activities in Mozambique.³⁷

- **Tanzania**

Compared with other African nations, Tanzania is relatively stable and has peaceful conditions for investment to sustain its operations, supported by major economic reforms and incentives by the government. It possesses substantial natural gas and mineral reserves, like gold, diamonds, tanzanite, silver, copper, iron ore, cobalt, nickel, uranium, and graphite.³⁸ China, the UK,

Canada, and Australia have already made inroads through large foreign investments in these resources. China's bilateral trade with Tanzania reached US\$ 11.28 billion in 2025, making it the largest trading partner of Tanzania³⁹ with around 39% of total FDI.⁴⁰ India's trade with Tanzania increased from US\$ 4.5 bn in 2021-22 to US\$ 9.02 bn in 2025-26, making it the second-largest trading partner of Tanzania, exporting pharmaceuticals and chemicals, petroleum products, electrical goods, motor vehicles, sugar, articles made of iron and steel, and machinery.⁴¹ On the other hand, Tanzania exports cashew nuts, gold ore, gemstones, ores, metal scrap, timber, pulses, and cloves to India. India is also one of the top five FDI sources in Tanzania, with an investment of USD 4.74 billion in 2025, providing it with significant opportunities in tapping critical mineral resources. Two Indian firms, Nazareth Investment Company Limited and Pacco Gems Limited, obtained a mining licence for Graphite in Tanzania's Lindi/Ruangwa area.⁴² Though the project has not yet started producing graphite on a commercial scale as of now, Tanzania's graphite resources may potentially be used by India as part of a long-term initiative to create more robust supply chains for advanced manufacturing and the energy transition. Tanzania also holds substantial natural gas reserves of 57.54 trillion standard cubic feet (TCF). The primary exploration areas encompass Eyasi-Wembere, Manzi Bay North, and West Songo Songo, with the Lindi Mtwara/Ruvuma basin emerging as a strategic energy zone.

There exists substantial scope for enhancing cooperation between India and Tanzania in areas like power transmission, renewable energy, and hydrocarbons. Yet India's current commercial presence in Tanzania's energy sector remains relatively limited. In 2025, during India Energy Week 2025, Tanzania discussed collaboration on LNG imports to India, along with hydrocarbon exploration and production in Tanzania.⁴³ However, India is yet to bridge the gap between expressing interest and actual upstream participation. During the recent 5th India-Tanzania Joint Trade Committee meeting, India extended offers for consultancy services, capacity building, project management, and the development of energy infrastructure, which encompasses gearbox systems and hybrid energy solutions.⁴⁴ Both nations

have reiterated their commitment to a fivefold increase in their bilateral hydrocarbon trade.⁴⁵ Alongside cooperation in natural gas, India also imported coal worth US\$ 44.9 mn in 2025-26 from Tanzania, reflecting significant scope to further boost the bilateral energy trade.⁴⁶

Tanzania's increasing population and expanding urbanisation, coupled with its linkages with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African Community (EAC), present Indian investors with significant opportunities to access a vast domestic and regional market. It links Tanzania's maritime geography to India's Indian Ocean perspective, offering various investment prospects. In April 2026, during the 5th session of the India-Tanzania Joint Trade Committee, both countries discussed prospective collaboration in geological exploration and mining, the gemstone sector, the MSME sector, education and skill development through vocational training, industrial research, digital public infrastructure, sharing expertise in shipbuilding, and a potential partnership in port infrastructure development.⁴⁷

With a coastline of around 1400 km along the western Indian Ocean, Tanzania is crucial for India's maritime interests. In the defence domain, both countries signed an MoU on defence cooperation in Oct 2003, followed by another MoU on hydrography in 2015, which facilitated the deployment of Indian naval survey vessels to conduct hydrographic surveys of Tanzanian ports and to prepare navigational charts.⁴⁸ Since 2023, both nations have been progressing toward operational maritime engagements, with Indian naval and coast guard vessels conducting port visits in Tanzania, participating in joint training exercises, and undertaking EEZ surveillance. During the 4th Joint Defence Cooperation Committee meeting in February 2026, the two countries explored new domains of cooperation in areas like counter-terrorism, military medicine, electronic warfare, cyber, and artificial intelligence (AI).⁴⁹ The next proposed meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee could set the ground for developing institutional mechanisms to further enhance maritime security, coastal surveillance, hydrographic

cooperation, maritime domain awareness, training, defence exercises and cooperation.⁵⁰

- **Madagascar**

The diplomatic relations between India and Madagascar have experienced significant growth during the past ten years. The bilateral trade between the two countries has reached USD 455.74 million in 2024-25, with India exporting rice, refined petroleum, pharmaceuticals, cotton textiles, machinery, cars, manufactured items, and iron and steel products to Madagascar and importing cloves, spices, legumes, essential oils, and graphite from it.⁵¹

Madagascar features a notable concentration of uranium, along with thorium and gold. Apart from this, it is also rich in other minerals and metals like mica, cobalt, titanium, nickel, ilmenite and zircon. Further, it is the second-largest producer of graphite, contributing 5% to the global production, opening up huge prospects for Indian investments.⁵² A London-based company, Tirupati Carbons & Chemicals Ltd., owned by an Indian national, has established a graphite processing plant and commenced extensive mining activities at the Vatomina Graphite project in Brickaville district in the Atsinanana Region.⁵³ It is located very close to the port city of Tsomasina. Apart from this, India also has a significant presence in the telecommunications and healthcare industries.

Its significance has increased after the commercial discovery of oil in Tsimiroro, situated in Madagascar's onshore Morondava Basin, containing estimated reserves of 1.7 billion barrels of heavy oil.⁵⁴ It is projected to produce 600 bpd by the end of 2026, predominantly for domestic utilisation.⁵⁵ The meagre output volumes, restricted commercially available supplies and storage capabilities, and the lack of developed export infrastructure render it mostly unfeasible for India's crude import needs. However, the WTO's 4th trade policy review of Madagascar highlights that Bharat PetroResources, an Indian PSU, obtained offshore exploration permits in the Morondava Basin in 2019, reflecting an Indian upstream interest and presence in Madagascar.⁵⁶

Madagascar's geostrategic importance is attributed not only to its proximity to the Mozambique Channel but also to the vast maritime EEZ of 1.14 mn sq km it acquires, along with the accessibility it provides in the SWIO.⁵⁷ Here, India's and Madagascar's maritime interests and relationship become more substantial than their bilateral trade. Given its extensive fishing and offshore energy resources, conflicting EEZ claims, and the threats posed by IUU fishing and piracy, Madagascar, as a least developed country, has limited naval or coast guard capacity, leaving it with poor maritime governance. Therefore, it needs resources, capacity building, and training to address these challenges. For India, Madagascar's geographic location provides it with a strategic advantage in monitoring maritime traffic, protecting commercial shipping and supply chains, conducting anti-piracy operations, tackling IUU fishing, safeguarding offshore resources, strengthening maritime domain awareness (MDA), and establishing surveillance infrastructure.

Both countries signed an MoU for defence collaboration in 2018, facilitating capacity building for Madagascar's Navy and coast guard, along with joint military exercises to deal with various unconventional maritime threats.⁵⁸ Over the last decade, as part of India's military diplomacy, India's port calls to Madagascar have served three primary purposes: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), strategic and defence capacity building and joint maritime security operations. For instance, INS Shardul visited Antsiranana Port in March 2020 during heavy floods; INS Kesari under Op SAGAR-I in May 2020; and INS Airawat as part of Op VANILLA in 2020 post Cyclone Diane; and INS Jalashwa visited Port Ehoala in March 2021 during famine and drought.⁵⁹ Both countries conducted their maiden joint patrol in March 2021 in Madagascar's EEZ, along with the PASSEX (Passage Exercise). Apart from this, INS Suvarna & INS Tarkash visited Port Diego Suarez in October 2022 to impart training to Malagasy Special Forces,⁶⁰ followed by a visit by ICGS Saksham at Antsiranana in March 2025, focusing on Maritime Search and Rescue (M-SAR), Marine Pollution Response (MPR), and Maritime Law Enforcement.⁶¹ Madagascar also participated in AKIMEYA exercises in 2025, focusing on interoperability and shared security in the SWIO.

In addition, the Regional Maritime Information International Fusion Centre in Madagascar promotes intelligence exchange with India's Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region to establish a uniform operational overview for the IOR.⁶² The two countries also formalised a pact on Cooperation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters in 2024. India is engaged in capacity building for Madagascar through the ITEC initiative and the India-Africa Forum.⁶³

- **Comoros**

The Comoros is an archipelagic country comprising three main islands: Anjouan, Grande Comore and Mohéli, with a 160,000 sq km EEZ.⁶⁴ It is strategically located on the northern entrance of the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and Mozambique. The economic partnership between India and Comoros is framed by India's MAHASAGAR initiative and vision. Since 2008, India's Duty-Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) Scheme for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) has considerably benefited Comoros by offering its exports preferential access to the large Indian market. This is substantiated by the rising bilateral trade between the two countries. It rose in 2025-26 (up to December 2025) to USD 81.71 mn from USD 50.77 mn in 2024-25.⁶⁵ Comoros exports to India comprise cloves, essential oils, vanilla, and scrap metals, whereas India exports rice, buffalo meat, pharmaceuticals, cotton textiles, and iron and steel.

Beyond trade, both countries reflect similar views on a range of regional and multilateral issues, including maritime security concerns in the littoral waters. They aim to strengthen their maritime defence cooperation as part of broader efforts to promote collaborative security in the Indian Ocean. In 2019, the Indian vice president's visit to Comoros led to a General Cooperation Agreement focused on economic assistance and maritime security. Both countries signed an MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Defence, along with India announcing grants to provide Comoros with medicines and medical equipment, transport vehicles, interceptor boats, and 1000 Mt of rice.⁶⁶ India also extended training to the Comoros through

ITEC programs, special courses for diplomats and workshops on maritime information sharing, the energy domain, and other development-related domains.

Alongside this, as part of defence diplomacy, India also provided professional interactions and joint training to the Comorian Coast Guard. For instance, the INS Trikand and INS Mumbai provided training to the Comoros Coast Guard in 2018 on handling small weapons, firefighting, and bridgemanSHIP;⁶⁷ INS Tarkash visited in October 2022 at Port Mutsamudu, conducting capability enhancement activities; and in 2025, ICGS Saksham visited Moroni Port for a three-day goodwill visit to train the Comoros Coast Guard.⁶⁸ Comoros has also actively participated in India's flagship multilateral naval exercise, MILAN, as part of India's maritime outreach and security cooperation in the WIO. India also plays a significant role in the maintenance of the defence assets of Comoros. For instance, INS Trishul in 2023 visited Port Mutsamudu and conducted various maintenance workshops and repaired communications equipment and navigation radar displays at Port Control;⁶⁹ and INS Kesari extended technical assistance in repairing a grounded vessel of the Comorian Coast Guard.⁷⁰

India, in contrast to other major powers active in the region, has not been able to develop effective diplomatic relations with the Comoros. This gap signifies a strategic weakness and an overlooked opportunity that requires immediate consideration. For instance,

- Comoros, with a substantial EEZ, has one of the most productive tuna fishing grounds. India, while being the largest export destination for Comoros, has not managed to establish a fisheries access agreement, in contrast to several other European or Asian countries.⁷¹
- Additionally, its proximity to the Rovuma Basin and the shared sedimentary characteristics reflect that the Comoros Basin could have large unexplored offshore hydrocarbon potential.

- In 2013, India, via EXIM Bank, provided a line of credit amounting to USD 41.60 million for the installation of an 18 MW heavy fuel oil power plant in Moroni. Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL) and Overseas Infrastructure Alliance were awarded the contract, and the foundation stone was laid in 2015.⁷² However, the implementation later encountered delays due to payment disputes and insufficient oversight.⁷³

Further, China's growing influence in Comoros, through its investments in road connectivity and airport development projects, and the dual-use potential of upgraded ports could provide China with surveillance capabilities in waters important to Indian shipping, which could be detrimental to India's maritime security.⁷⁴ Comoros' maritime zone is surrounded by various non-traditional threats, along with the persistent secessionist tendency within the state due to conflicting political interests among multiple ethnic groups.⁷⁵ The multiple coups, followed by the poor maritime governance capabilities of Comoros, further accentuate the threats to India's maritime interests. Therefore, India needs to leverage the island territories through diplomacy and timely completion of infrastructural development projects, information dominance, and economic linkages.⁷⁶ India also needs to engage with Comoros on marine resource governance, scientific surveys, and sustainable blue economy development, along with extending maritime capacity-building programs through training and exercises to be able to monitor its vast EEZ and create operational linkages with Indian naval forces.

- **France**

France has a strategic overseas presence in the Mozambique Channel with administrative control over Mayotte and scattered islands (Map 1), running north to south across the entire stretch of the channel (Tromelin lies on the eastern side of Madagascar and not in the Mozambique Channel). Some of these islands are disputed, with Comoros claiming sovereignty over Mayotte and Madagascar over scattered islands. These islands are particularly important for France, as each one provides control

over an EEZ of 200 nautical miles in the surrounding waters and collectively encompasses more than half of the Mozambique Channel. This entails an added responsibility for France towards fisheries management, illicit activities and trafficking, environmental protection and maritime security in the region through regional cooperation. These islands hold significant importance for France, as each one provides control over an EEZ of 200 NM in the surrounding waters and collectively encompasses more than half of the Mozambique Channel. It maintains a naval presence in Mayotte, enabling the monitoring of maritime activities over an area of 74,000 sq km of EEZ. It also maintains a permanent military presence in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU), Djibouti (FFDJ) and Reunion Island in the WIO.⁷⁷ It is constantly enhancing its capabilities by equipping its facilities with new ships and aircraft for better surveillance of France's EEZs.⁷⁸

France and India became strategic partners in 1998. Over these 28 years, both nations have identified alignment in their strategic priorities in the areas of defence and maritime security, in the IOR in general and the SWIO in particular. In 2015, they initiated a bilateral maritime dialogue to discuss and align their strategic and security policies in the Indo-Pacific region. They also signed an agreement for reciprocal logistics support, which permits the Indian Navy to utilise French bases in the WIO, thereby enhancing cooperation and interoperability between their armed forces. In 2017, both countries signed a bilateral White Shipping Agreement to facilitate reciprocal information sharing on commercial vessels and build situational awareness of maritime merchant traffic.⁷⁹ In March 2018, the Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region was signed, reaffirming the commitments towards maritime information sharing and joint maritime domain awareness.

Both nations are enhancing collaboration in hydrography and marine cartography, as demonstrated by the joint maritime surveillance mission carried out in the Mozambique Channel involving Falcon 50 aircraft and P-8I.⁸⁰ Such joint endeavours are not only focused on surveillance and

ocean bed mapping but also on combating piracy, drug trafficking, arms smuggling and the economic exploitation and aggressive presence of extra-regional players on the eastern seaboard of Africa.

Further, in this regard, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), along with the French Space Agency, CNES, agreed to develop and launch a first space-based system of low-Earth-orbit satellites to enhance their identification, detection and ship-tracking capabilities for a range of vessels transiting through IOR, on a real-time basis through satellite-based AIS, unlike the non-satellite-based AIS, which could be turned off when the vessels do not want to be detected.⁸¹ However, little information is available on its progress so far.

Another area of convergence is in the underwater domain awareness, where the two countries could collaborate to address threats associated with seabed infrastructure, offshore energy facilities, and underwater warfare activities detrimental to regional maritime security. Among these, one of the important areas of collaboration involves the digital infrastructure that links East Africa and the SWIO to global networks via submarine cables. Several of these are laid across the Mozambique Channel and the surrounding waters.⁸² In collaboration with the regional and other extra-regional players whose interests align in this domain, it could establish a regional database of critical cable routes and shore-end cable infrastructure, along with cable maintenance and repair facilities.

By recognising these interests, both countries, in January 2024, in a joint statement, expanded their areas of cooperation across multiple domains from seabed awareness to dedicated space-based monitoring and maritime capacity building with like-minded regional partners.⁸³ France is actively involved in several multilateral operations related to maritime safety and security in this region; for instance, EUNAVFOR and Operation ATALANTA focus on anti-piracy and drug trafficking operations in the WIO; under Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 operates for combating illicit activities in the region; and more

recently, the EUNAVFOR ASPIDES operation, launched in 2024 as a defensive maritime security operation in response to the Houthis' attack on merchant shipping in 2023.⁸⁴

India and France, too, have been conducting bilateral naval exercises, VARUNA, since 2001, focusing on deepening interoperability between the two navies in areas such as anti-submarine warfare, replenishment at sea, anti-mine operations, and information sharing. In 2018, Exercise Varuna was conducted between the two navies, covering the Arabian Sea, the Southwestern Indian Ocean (SWIO), and the Bay of Bengal. The subsequent exercises reflected continuity, further training, and more sophisticated operations involving undersea warfare, protecting shipping, multi-domain fleet operations, logistical cooperation, and tactical interoperability. In 2025, for the 23rd edition of Exercise Varuna, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Charles De Gaulle was deployed by the French Navy along with India's aircraft carrier Vikrant.⁸⁵ The 24th edition was hosted by France at Toulon Naval Base, wherein the Talwar-class INS TRISHUL participated.⁸⁶ Apart from this, France has been an active participant in the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and has been a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since 2020. France also joined India's flagship Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), reiterating its commitment to regional security and stability.

Conclusion

For major regional and extra-regional players, the littoral states around the Mozambique Channel find distinct importance in their respective security and economic calculus. For instance, France approaches it through territorial presence and resource acquisition while preserving its resident power position; China through economic connectivity, building long-term strategic depth, sustained presence for operational experience, maritime familiarity and the ability to defend its interests; and the US, whose interests lie in keeping the region politically open and operationally accessible while limiting opportunities for its adversaries (China).

For India, the Mozambique Channel no longer remains a distant sea but has moved into the core of its maritime calculus, especially post-2015, when India came out with its SAGAR initiatives, followed by MHASAGAR. Also, the recurrent disruption in the conflicting waters is particularly consequential for India, along with the increasing risk of multi-chokepoint disruption becoming a norm rather than being a standalone incident. With no solutions or consensus reached among the conflicting parties, such crises have become a test of endurance for the countries that rely heavily on these routes.

The diversion of maritime traffic around the Cape of Good Hope has highlighted the strategic importance of the Mozambique Channel as a functional channel instead of being an alternative route. India has already been working towards building long-term economic, defence and strategic relations with the littoral states of the WIO. With considerable depth, continuity and diasporic linkages in their relations, India aims to secure its interests by maintaining a favourable maritime balance and strengthening regional partners based on their priorities, as highlighted in its MAHASAGAR approach. As of now, the partnership is based on issue-based convergence and is consistent with India's doctrine of strategic autonomy. India neither carries a colonial legacy nor a reputation for coercive power projection or exploitative economic initiatives. It also aims to prevent any adversarial state from gaining any exclusive strategic influence which jeopardises India's interests, increase maritime domain awareness, operational reach and establish India as a preferred security partner for smaller Indian Ocean states.

India now needs to build a wider system of maritime resilience that could not only absorb such disruption but also create long-term, reliable and secure routes and supply chains. The next step for India is to ensure that the Mozambique Channel remains safe and secure. For this, India needs to have a planned Mozambique Channel-specific strategy with required resources and institutional cover. India needs to work on not just the security arrangements involving navies and coast guards but also ensure timely completion of development projects and enforcement of economic cooperation in the region. This would develop reliability, credibility, cooperative

dependency, and sensitivity towards each other's insecurities, both on land and in the maritime domain. India could not secure the entire IOR on its own but needs secure patches of regions created by the countries in the vicinity and integrated into its maritime security architecture. Thus, India should continue to empower the littoral states in capability development and assist in developing a robust maritime governance structure and policy formulations. India's maritime security will remain incomplete unless its engagement extends beyond vulnerable chokepoints to wider maritime corridors, littoral partnerships and resource supply chains that sustain its economic growth.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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