

**Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Inquiry into opportunities for strengthening Australia's relations with the Republic
of France**

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This joint submission by Dr David Brewster and Dr Frédéric Grare, addresses options for enhancing political, security and defence cooperation between Australia and France and options for enhancing strategic cooperation, including in the Indo Pacific region and through multilateral fora.

Dr David Brewster is a Senior Research Fellow with the National Security College. He is currently involved in a two-year research project, funded by the Department of Defence, on Australia's strategy in the Indian Ocean as part of its broader Indo Pacific strategy.

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This submission complements another joint submission made by Dr Brewster with Professor Rory Medcalf and Dr Anthony Bergin which focuses on opportunities for enhanced cooperation with France in the Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean/Antarctica in relation to environmental security issues.

The views expressed in this submission are solely those of the authors and not of any organization with which they are affiliated.

Key arguments made in this submission

This submission argues that France increasingly sees Australia as a key strategic partner in the Indian Ocean and there are many opportunities for enhanced cooperation in that region. It advocates that Australia and France should actively develop their partnership to help build effective regional security architecture in the Indian Ocean, in cooperation with other like-minded partners.

The key points of this submission are:

- Strategic competition in the Indian Ocean is growing very quickly. China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) is in the process of aggressively expanding its presence and influence in the region.

- In response, Australia's strategic partners, including the United States, India, France and Japan, are becoming increasingly active across the Indian Ocean.
- France increasingly sees Australia as a key strategic partner in the Indian Ocean and there are many opportunities for enhanced cooperation in that region.
- Australia should work with France in building the region's strategic architecture, including through groupings such as the Indian Ocean Navy Symposium (IONS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).
- Australia and France should look for opportunities to work together in the scientific field as part of the contest for influence in the region.
- Australia should also promote trilateral cooperation with France and India in the Indian Ocean.

Recommendations

We make the following recommendations for enhancing political, security, defence and strategic cooperation between Australia and France:

1. Australia should move beyond a simple geographic definition of the Indo Pacific to work with its strategic partners in responding to strategic instability where it occurs throughout the Indian Ocean.
2. Australia should continue to work with France in developing the Indian Ocean Navy Symposium (IONS) as an effective network among regional navies.
3. Australia should actively support France's application for membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a like-minded partner with similar interests in making that grouping more effective.
4. Australia should seek observer status with the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).
5. Australia and France should coordinate their capacity building efforts in Indian Ocean maritime security. Transnational security threats, including environmental security threats, should be a key focus
6. Australia and France should continue to work towards building a trilateral comprehensive security partnership with India as a long-term objective.
7. Australia and France should expand scientific cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. Such cooperation would be both sustainably useful for the populations of the Indian Ocean littoral but, in the present battle of Covid19 pandemic narrative, could also help build up an effective counter-narrative to China's propaganda in the region.

Submission

Growing strategic competition and instability in the Indian Ocean

Australia is a major Indian Ocean state. It has by far the longest coastline and by far the largest area of maritime jurisdiction of any country in the region. In one way or another, Australia relies on the Indian Ocean for much of its wealth. But despite the magnitude of its economic and strategic interests, Australia tends to see itself as an Indian Ocean state only in a secondary sense.

For more than a century, Australia's engagement with the Indian Ocean has taken place in the context of the military predominance of its great-power allies, which allowed it to pay relatively limited attention to the regional strategic environment. However, after several decades of US military predominance, the Indian Ocean is now becoming a much more contested strategic space, driven by the relative decline in US predominance, the emergence of India as a major power, and China's growing economic and military presence.

In particular, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has the potential to fundamentally alter the strategic dynamics of the region by effectively transforming China from a power with a small Indian Ocean presence into a fully resident power. Australia's understandable concerns regarding China's influence operations in the Pacific islands have diverted its attention from similar contests that are occurring among Indian Ocean states.

For some years China has been active in and around South Asia, in expanding its roles in countries such as Pakistan and Myanmar and the island states of Sri Lanka and Maldives. This has been the cause of considerable political instability in Sri Lanka and Maldives. In recent years, China has also become very active along the eastern seaboard of Africa and among the islands of the western Indian Ocean. As in the Pacific, these contests for influence underpin Beijing's efforts to gain control resources (marine, energy, mineral and agricultural) and access to military facilities in that region. Two examples provide an indication of these efforts.

In Tanzania, China signed agreements to build East Africa's largest deep-water port at Bagamoyo at a cost of US\$10 billion. Among other things, the project would have given China control over the port for 99 years, left the Tanzanian government deeply indebted and would have prohibited Tanzania from constructing any other ports along its Indian Ocean coast. Analysts feared that Bagamoyo port would soon be made available for use by the Chinese navy as a valuable outpost in East Africa. In 2019, Tanzanian President John Magufuli called for major revisions to the deal, stating that the conditions of the project

were “tough conditions that can only be accepted by mad people.”¹ The Tanzanian Government recently cancelled the project after China refused to renegotiate the terms.

In Madagascar, a Chinese consortium was granted fishing rights for 10 years in relation to the country's entire EEZ. The deal was made in December 2018, days prior to the resignation of Madagascar President Hery Rajaonarimampianina, and there can be little doubt that the arrangement would have involved corrupt payments. According to reports, the arrangement would have allowed the Chinese company to deploy up to 330 fishing vessels in Madagascan waters. Given Madagascar's past experience with bottom trawling by Chinese fishing boats, where fishing nets are used to catch fish indiscriminately while also destroying life on the sea bed, this would have had a significant adverse long-term effect on Madagascar's marine environment. Following an international outcry, the deal was later cancelled by Madagascar's current president.

It is not just China. Russia is also becoming increasingly active in the western Indian Ocean, including in attempts to interfere in Madagascan political life.² Indeed, there are also worrying signs of growing strategic cooperation between Russia and China in the western Indian Ocean that could presage a new regional axis between them. This has included trilateral China-Russia-South Africa naval exercises off Cape Town in November 2019 and trilateral China-Russia-Iran naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman in December 2019. There is a risk that Sino-Russian cooperation could be expanded into coordination in influence operations against weak and vulnerable states in the region or potentially even in the sharing of logistical facilities for military purposes.

Responses of Australia's strategic partners

Australia's key strategic partners in the Indian Ocean, the United States, India, France and Japan are now stepping up their activities in the Indian Ocean in response to these developments as part of their Indo Pacific strategies.

Although Australia has officially adopted a somewhat narrow geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region,³ Australia's partners in the Indian Ocean now see the Indo Pacific as extending to the coast of Africa and including the Arabian Sea.

¹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Tanzania President terms China's BRI port project exploitative” *Economic Times*, 6 July 2020.

² Michael Schwartz and Gaelle Borgia, “How Russia Meddles Abroad for Profit: Cash, Trolls and a Cult Leader” *The New York Times*, 11 November 2019.

³ Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper defines the Indo-Pacific as ‘the region ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States’. *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, page 1.

Not surprisingly, India places significance on Indo Pacific cooperation in the western Indian Ocean. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar recently articulated the importance of an extended vision of the Indo Pacific to include the space up to the coasts of Africa.⁴

Policy makers in Washington are also beginning to extend their Indo Pacific strategy into western side of the Indian Ocean. The US National Defense Authorization Act for 2020 prescribes expanded US-India military cooperation in a new area that it calls the 'Western Indian Ocean' (ie. the western side of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, but not the Persian Gulf). This space is within the current areas of responsibility of three US Combatant Commands - USINDOPACOM, USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM. The practical effect of this mandate is to signal the *de facto* extension of Washington's conception of the Indo Pacific to the east coast of Africa.

France and Japan, Australia's other key Indian Ocean partners, are now upping the level of their diplomatic, political and security engagement across the entire Indian Ocean.

France's perspectives on Australia in the Indian Ocean

France increasingly sees Australia as a key strategic partner in the Indian Ocean. France sees Australia as a like-minded country and one of the very few regional states that are capable of contributing substantively to the stability of the region. Australia is also viewed in Paris as a country that sees stability through the same prism and effective multilateralism as the way to ensure it. France sees Australia as playing a key role in advancing regional institutions and intends to partner with it in order to make them more effective in the future.

The French perspective on Australia's role in the Indian Ocean was in many ways reflected in the May 2018 vision statement of Prime Minister Turnbull and French President Emmanuel Macron, made during the latter's visit to Australia. There the leaders committed to:

- strengthening the Indian Ocean region's architecture and enhancing regional collaboration on shared security and other challenges.
- cooperating closely and with like-minded partners to bolster regional maritime security.
- involving other strategic partners more broadly in the growing cooperation between France and Australia, including through trilateral and other high-level dialogues.

These points are useful in understanding areas the strategic convergence between the two countries and defining their ambitions and approach.

⁴ Indrani Bagchi, "India expands Indo-Pacific policy" *The Times of India*, 15 December 2019.

Building the region's strategic architecture

The security architecture of the Indian Ocean region remains to be built, and France expects a partnership with Australia to help achieve this objective. Historically, trans-regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean has been very weak. However, in recent years the Indian Ocean has been witnessing the emergence of a series of cooperation networks which are now helping to tighten control of the Indian Ocean.

Probably the most effective trans-regional grouping is the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which brings together the region's navies for relatively informal networking and collaboration. The Royal Australian Navy was the chair of IONS in 2016-18, when it put considerable efforts into further developing the grouping as a valuable tool for outreach across the region.

The French Navy will be taking the chair of IONS this year as part of its push to further strengthen the grouping. France will be hosting a meeting of naval chiefs from throughout the region and elsewhere (originally scheduled for June 2020, but now postponed). The overall objective of the French presidency of the IONS is to contribute to its greater operationalization, with a particular emphasis on HADR – a major collective exercise should be organized in 2021 - and the fight against illicit traffic.

It was hoped that the IONS meeting in Reunion will also include a visit by a German naval frigate, *Hamburg*, which will also visit Australia as part of Germany's enhanced presence in the Indo Pacific.⁵ This underscores the important role of France in encouraging its European partners to play a greater role in this region.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the region's main political grouping, remains a work in progress and requires some internal restructuring before it can meet its potential to become an effective regional organisation. Australia needs to continue its engagement with that organisation, while keeping our expectations limited. For historical reasons, despite its territorial presence in the Indian Ocean, France is not a member of IORA. Australia should therefore continue to actively support France's application for membership of IORA as a like-minded partner with similar interests in making that grouping more effective.

There is another regional organisation, much smaller and more focused in scope, that is worth noting. The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is a group of island states in the western Indian Ocean (including French Reunion, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles) that has been relatively effective in recent years in developing a voice for relatively small and weak island states. Two other Indian Ocean islands, Sri Lanka and Maldives, have also given consideration to joining the IOC as observers.

⁵ Dylan Nicholson, 'German frigate Hamburg to visit Indian Ocean and Australia' *Defence Connect*, 17 March 2020.

With the assistance of France and funding from the European Union, the IOC has facilitated maritime security capacity building among its members. There have also been calls to transform the IOC into an “Indian Ocean Community” with the objective of enhancing intraregional economic integration.⁶ In recent times China has joined the IOC as an observer, as well as India in March 2020. Russia has also indicated a desire to join as an observer.

It is our submission that Australia should consider joining the IOC as an observer. The IOC (and France) would welcome Australia's presence. It would be an opportunity for Australia and France to work closely with India in balancing the role of China. This could be achieved at minimal cost to Australia. In addition to political and diplomatic support for the IOC, Australia could also provide training, technical or policy development expertise at relatively modest cost. The island state members of the IOC look to Australia as a benign partner, meaning that a little bit of help can go a long way in securing influence.

Cooperation to bolster regional maritime security

Cooperation in maritime security must also extend well beyond traditional threats. Although this submission has focused on strategic competition, that is not the only source of threats in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is also subject to a wide range of transnational security threats, including piracy, illegal fishing and people smuggling. This is being exacerbated by a range of environmental threats.

This has also changed the terms of coalition building in the Indian Ocean. This allows for more inclusive coalitions of a less confrontational nature but which also provide options with real strategic value.

The potential for enhanced Australia-France cooperation in combating environmental security threats was the subject of the recent Australia-France Risk Mapping Project described in this report: <https://www.sadf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Environmental-security-in-Eastern-Indian-Ocean-1.pdf>. The results of that project are discussed in greater detail in the submission by the National Security College to this Committee.

Working with other strategic partners including through trilateral and other high-level dialogues

One consequence of the growing multipolarity of the Indian Ocean is that security engagement in the Indian Ocean will increasingly rely on so-called ‘minilateral’ arrangements with selected partners.

⁶ Government of Mauritius, “The IOC needs to be strengthened to pave the new history of the Indian Ocean region, says Minister Bodha” 7 August 2019. <http://www.govmu.org/English/News/Pages/The-IOC-needs-to-be-strengthened-to-pave-the-new-history-of-the-Indian-Ocean-region,-says-Minister-Bodha.aspx>

Developments in the Indo-Pacific strategic environment are spurring new and more complex strategic geometries across the region. One important trend is towards the establishment of minilateral security dialogues, which involve small informal groupings of states that share common security interests on particular issues. These networks are now only in a nascent state. They provide highly valuable forums for the discussion of Indian Ocean issues and could provide new structures for cooperation in the Indian Ocean—perhaps ultimately the ‘building blocks’ for a broader regional security architecture.⁷

For several years, Australia, India and Japan have participated in a regular trilateral dialogue at Foreign Secretary level. This has been a very successful vehicle for exchanging views on issues of shared concern across the Indo-Pacific and could increasingly become a mechanism for the coordination of efforts by the three countries in the Indian Ocean, including in maritime security capacity-building among regional states.

French President Emmanuel Macron has also previously promoted the potential for a trilateral partnership between France, Australia and India, the three resident states of the Indian Ocean with the strongest maritime security capabilities. Although India has been somewhat lukewarm on this proposal, its actions in signing logistical support agreements with France and now Australia suggest trilateral cooperation may be a real possibility. Australia should continue to aim for this as a long-term objective. An Australia-France-India trilateral partnership in the Indian Ocean would be an important and valuable addition to the expanding web of relationships across the region.

Building up scientific networks to enhance comprehensive security

To the above three points noted by Prime Minister Turnbull and President Macron, we suggest a further area of collaboration in the Indian Ocean. Scientific cooperation, in particular in development related sciences is an often-neglected area of security architecture. Yet it can contribute significantly to stability, while inclusivity is very much part of its DNA.

Building up, strengthening and enlarging scientific networks in the Indian Ocean region, where societies are still mostly rural with often underdeveloped scientific infrastructures. As development sciences cover agriculture and health related specialties, including medicine and veterinary science, but also transmission of disease from animal to human (60% of human diseases come from animals), they would be of particular significance for most littoral states of the Indian Ocean.

France has a large network of scientific research institutions in the western part of the Indian Ocean that are open to cooperation with other parts of the region. Australia and France could join forces to expand their cooperation as well as their networks to other parts of the region. Such cooperation would be both sustainably useful for the populations of the

⁷ Natalie Sambhi, ‘Time for an Indo-Australis?’, *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 3 July 2018. [online](#).

Indian Ocean littoral but could also, in the present battle of Covid19 pandemic narrative, help build up an effective counter-narrative to China's propaganda in the region.

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Biographical information

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Dr Brewster's books include *India as an Asia Pacific power*, about India's strategic role in the Asia Pacific and *India's Ocean: the story of India's bid for regional leadership* which examines India's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean. His latest edited volume is *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*.

Dr Brewster's recent reports include *Australia's Second Sea: Facing our Multipolar Future in the Indian Ocean* which proposes a new economic and security strategy for the Indian Ocean region. He is also the author of the report *Addressing Geo-environmental Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region: Setting a Regional Agenda*, which discusses key environmental security challenges in the Indian Ocean and proposes initiatives that IORA and its member states might pursue to address these challenges.

Dr Frédéric Grare is a non-resident senior associate in Carnegie's South Asia Program. At Carnegie, his research focuses on South Asia Security issues and the search for a security architecture. Prior to joining Carnegie, Grare served as the Asia bureau at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs in the French Ministry of Defense. He also served at the French embassy in Pakistan and, from 1999 to 2003, as director of the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities in New Delhi. Grare has written extensively on security issues in Asia, in particular South Asia. His recent publications include *India Turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry*.