FRENCH PRESENCE IN INDIAN OCEAN: "KEY TO THE SEVEN SEAS"

Will the future of the world be decided in the Indian Ocean just as Mahan thought? France could deploy a permanent military capability in the region through its FAZSOI and ALINDIEN military bodies, the heirs of a long-standing French presence in this ocean. However, could the rise of India and China, both nuclear powers, the difficult political and economic circumstances of coastal states as well as growing rivalries jeopardize the current stability of this ocean and forcibly redefine France's role?

ISSUES AND PLAYERS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

A major political and economic area, the Indian Ocean has been destabilized in the recent years by the return of piracy. There are three key elements that allow for a better understanding of the challenges faced by the international community: the plethora of players, namely those who possess nuclear weapons, the presence of natural resources (55% of global oil reserves, 60% uranium, 80% diamond, 40% gas and 40% gold) and the importance of sea routes for the global economy.

The United States is the most influential country in the Indian Ocean as they maintain the stability of trade routes, but France, India, China and the United Kingdom are also amongst the main players. India has recently decided to become more prominent in marine related matters in order to reach the world power status. On the other hand, even though China is not present, its obscure marine strategy has a heavy impact on the decisions made by countries in the region. Lastly, France benefits from a permanent military presence thanks to its overseas territories and bases in Djibouti and Abu Dhabi. Paris' mission is to secure the Indian Ocean by protecting its trade routes and maintaining its stability.

Cooperation between Indian and French navies
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MAINTAINING THE BALANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

Nevertheless, in a context where any instability directly threatens the global economy, Chinese/Indian, Indian/Pakistani or Iranian/Arabic rivalries are also real challenges for the international community.

Paris hopes to get closer to India, which is considered as an important partner. Since the strategic partnership of 1998, a string of contracts and joint exercises were launched. In 2005, India bought six Scorpene class submarines and since 2008 the two countries are cooperating in the Gulf of Aden against piracy, not to mention the Varuna exercise. Because of the rivalries with China and Pakistan, the success of this cooperation rests upon France's diplomatic ability to avoid exacerbating tensions.

Another sensitive area that may have an impact on the stability of the Indian Ocean is the Persian Gulf, with Iran and its nuclear ambitions at the heart of the oil route. This led to the creation of the joint French base in Abu Dhabi in 2008, and proved that the Indian Ocean remains a priority for France. This base can accommodate almost all naval vessels and has become an essential fulcrum for ships operating in the Gulf; it is here where "a part of our safety and that of the world are at stake" (the President of France, 2009).

PROTECT THE SHANGHAI-ROTTERDAM AXIS

It is crucial to ensure the smooth flow of the Shanghai-Rotterdam route, which is a major artery for global trade, and to stop the imbalances in the area by fighting against piracy (off the coast of Somalia...), mining (in the Persian Gulf...) and by helping coastal communities. France is actively involved in this. It is taking part in the EU ATALANTE mission, the EU's first ever naval operation for the fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Since the launch of this operation, in 2008, the French Navy took command of the Task Force on a regular basis. It has a frigate continually deployed, punctually deploys à marine patrol aircraft and provides logistical support to the Djibouti base. This has helped considerably reduce the number of pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia