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*Prospects for Minilateralism in the Western Indian Ocean*

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*Abstract*

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Traditionally, New Delhi has cooperated with the East and South African countries bordering the Indian Ocean within the broader framework of South-South Cooperation. Now within the Indo-Pacific narrative and increasing Chinese profile in the region, India's strategic engagement with the countries of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) has increased. This has taken the form of commercial and development interactions and maritime security cooperation. The India-Africa summit meetings and Prime Minister Modi's Africa policy has further sharpened these engagements. The paper looks at India's bilateral and multilateral engagements and explores scope for minilaterals involving India, a few of its major strategic partners and some key countries from the region. The paper argues that existing triangular development cooperation interactions in the WIO could be extended to trade and commerce, infrastructure connectivity and maritime cooperation in the form of possible minilaterals.

**Key Words:** Indo-Pacific, Minilateralism, Western Indian Ocean

*Introduction*

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Due to the growing prominence of the Indian Ocean within the context of contemporary Indo-Pacific narrative as well as India's traditional close ties with Africa, the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region has emerged as an important area of engagement for India. Many other powers including China are also active in the region. Most definitions of the WIO region include Comoros, French Indian Ocean territories (Mayotte and Reunion), Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania. Traditionally, India has dealt with countries in the WIO region mainly bilaterally within the broader policy of South-South Cooperation (SSC). More recent ties could also be explained within the context of India-Africa Forum Summits and ten guiding principles of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Africa policy. India's involvement in the region is further strengthened through its participation in the Indian Ocean Rim Association, commonly known as IORA. New Delhi has also cooperated with major powers like South Africa within Group of 20 (G20), Brazil- Russia- India- China-South Africa (BRICS), and India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA). Maldives is a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). As India occupies a key position in the Indian Ocean, it is keen to take more maritime responsibilities in the WIO. The region is vulnerable due to piracy, radicalisation and terrorism. Through maritime cooperation, New Delhi is also playing an important role in shaping the maritime security architecture in the WIO. This is done through

conducting anti-piracy patrols, bilateral maritime cooperation and coordination with multilateral arrangements like the Djibouti Code of Conduct. India's major engagement with the WIO countries is also through capacity building programmes, and lines of credit through development cooperation activities. In recent times, India has been collaborating with partners like the United Kingdom, United States, and Japan to implement various improvement initiatives through triangular cooperation arrangements. With the United States, India is working in Kenya and Mozambique. A strong partnership is emerging with the United Kingdom in Kenya and Tanzania. With Japan, a broad understanding is developing through implementation of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). As there is a limited engagement in the WIO region through unilateralism so far, the paper looks at possibilities of unilateral cooperation in specific areas of action.

### *Contextualising WIO Region through historic India-Africa Ties and Contemporary Indo-Pacific Narrative*

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In recent years, the WIO region has become important for Indian strategic calculations. Its significance, however, needs to be situated within the broader India-Africa relations and contemporary narrative on the Indo-Pacific. The interplay of these two factors will help us understand current dynamics and possible new alignments in terms of new regional or unilateral engagements. India and Africa share deep-rooted connections spanning historical, cultural, economic, and political domains, as numerous scholars have noted (Sharma, 2007; Taylor, 2012). The subcontinent's staunch opposition to colonialism, neo-colonialism, and apartheid has further cemented these ties over time. Throughout the years, India and Africa have often found themselves aligned on critical global matters, particularly in international economic negotiations where they've jointly advocated for a more equitable system favoring developing nations. The post-Cold War era has witnessed significant transformations in both India and Africa. However, their mutual importance has remained steadfast. Both regions boast youthful populations, expanding economies, and a wealth of developmental insights to exchange. The economic interactions between India and Africa in recent decades can largely be viewed through the lens of South-South Cooperation (SSC).

When placed side-by-side with earlier periods, Africa's recent economic trajectory has displayed substantial progress. While the 1990s saw sluggish growth lagging behind global and developing country averages, the continent experienced a significant upturn between 2001 and 2008. During this time, Africa's economy expanded at nearly 6% annually, rivalling the rapid growth of Asian developing nations.

Post-2009, various factors including global economic slowdown and commodity price fluctuations have tempered growth to around 3% per year. Although this rate falls short of India and other Asian economies, it still outpaces the global average slightly. This two-decade performance hints at Africa's substantial economic potential moving forward.

The boom in the early 2000s was partly driven by high primary product prices, but other sectors also contributed significantly. These included wholesale and retail trade, telecommunications, financial services, and construction. This economic renaissance has inspired ambitious goals, as outlined in Africa's *Agenda 2063* and its 15 flagship initiatives.

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Africa's recent economic strides, coupled with its youthful demographic and notable successes in sectors like agriculture, telecommunications, consumer markets, and banking, have instilled a newfound confidence across the continent. Several African nations now rank among the world's fastest-growing economies.

In contrast to global trends towards protectionism, Africa has taken a bold step by establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2019. With nearly universal participation from continental nations, this initiative represents the world's largest free trade area by country count. The AfCFTA aims to create a unified African market for goods and services while facilitating the movement of capital and people (Hartzenberg, 2019).

Despite the existence of numerous regional economic groups within Africa, intra-regional trade has remained low. The AfCFTA is expected to boost trade volumes and enable African companies to benefit from economies of scale.

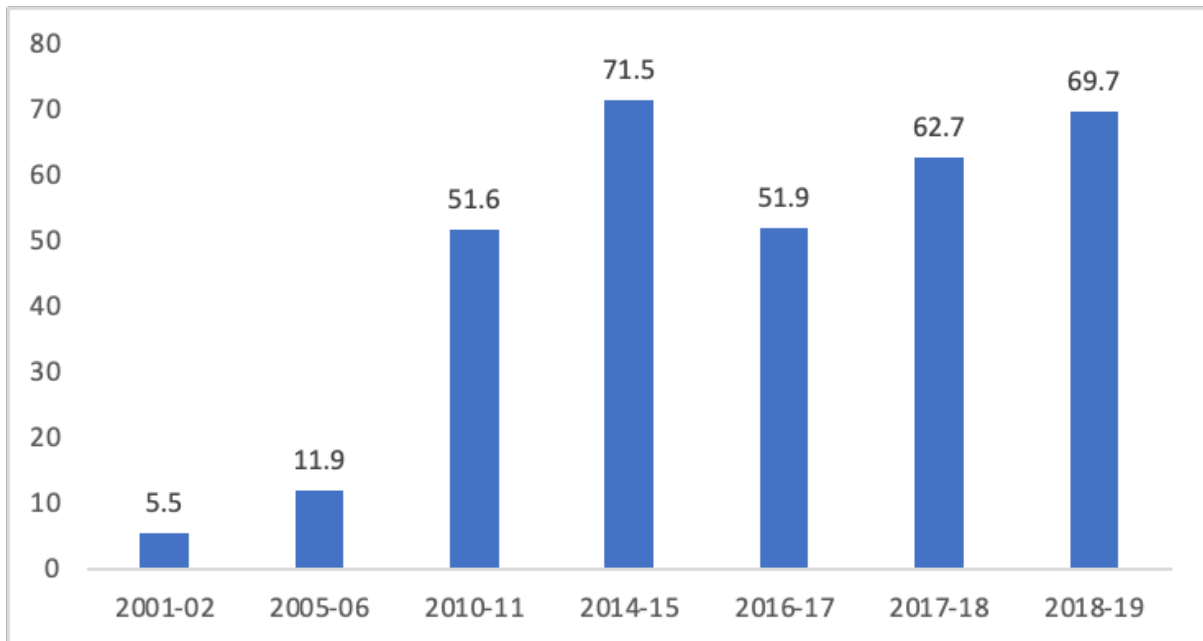
These evolving dynamics are shaping an emerging collaborative framework for progress between India and Africa. This relationship builds upon long-standing historical ties while leveraging the current economic vitality in both regions.

Economic shifts in Africa and India have led to a significant increase in bilateral trade, rising from approximately \$5.5 billion in 2001-02 to around \$70 billion in 2018-19. This growth trajectory saw trade reach \$52 billion in 2010-11 and peak at about \$72 billion in 2014-15.

Several policy initiatives have supported this trade expansion. In 2002, the Indian government launched the 'Focus Africa' program to enhance trade and investment ties. The India-Africa Summit, initiated in 2008, further strengthened these connections. Additionally, India's Duty Free Tariff Preferences (DFTP) scheme for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) has benefited bilateral trade. This scheme now covers 98% of India's tariff lines and includes 38 African countries.

However, trade remains concentrated in specific sectors. Roughly three-quarters of African exports to India consist of natural resources and primary commodities, while about 40% of Indian exports are pharmaceuticals and refined petroleum products (Afreximbank and Exim India, 2018).

Global economic slowdowns have impacted this trade relationship, with bilateral trade declining to \$52 billion in 2016-17. However, it rebounded to approximately \$70 billion by 2018-19, demonstrating resilience and potential for further growth (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: India-Africa Trade, 2001-02 to 2018-19 (US\$ billions)**

Source: Authors’ calculations based on Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India Database

The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region's coastal Eastern and Southern African nations have emerged as significant trade partners for India. Concurrently, Western Africa has gained prominence in India's trade landscape, primarily due to petroleum imports from Nigeria and gold from various countries in the region.

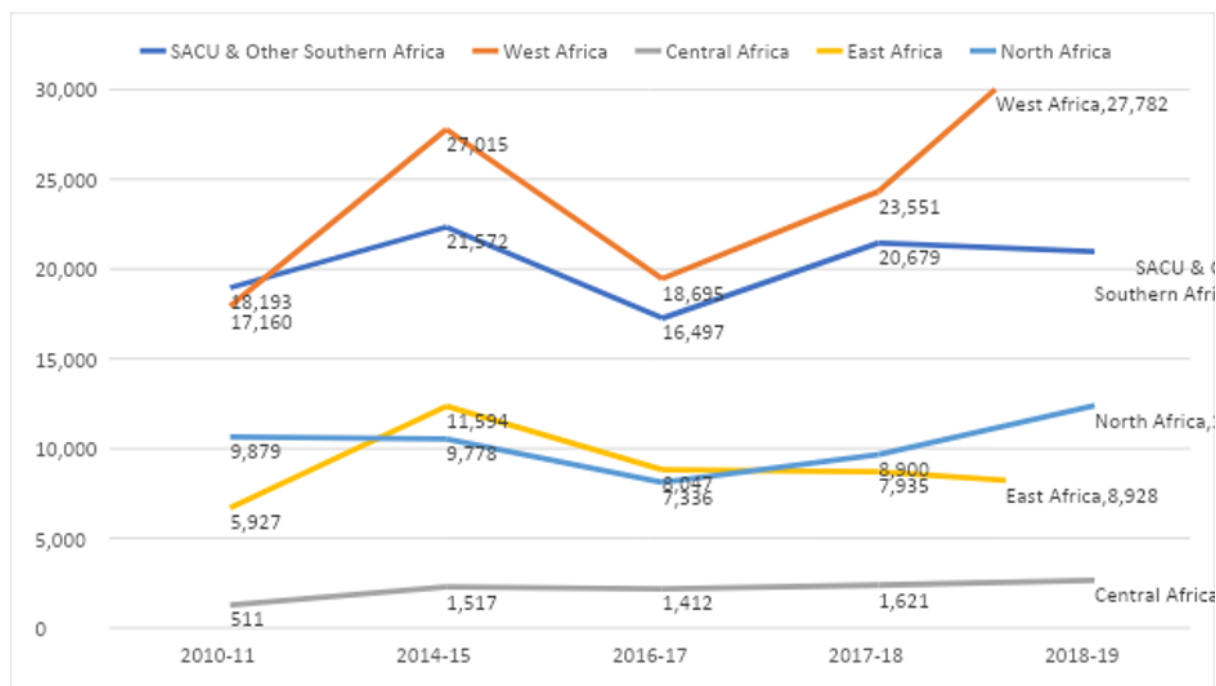
In Southern Africa, including the South African Customs Union (SACU) and neighbouring countries, South Africa stands out as a key market for Indian goods. Trade with Eastern African nations has also seen notable growth.

India's primary exports to these regions include pharmaceuticals, petroleum products, and vehicles. In return, it imports coal, metals, and vegetables. Among the Eastern African countries, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Mauritius have established themselves as major trading partners with India (Sachdeva, 2020).

**Figure 2: India’s Trade with Different African Regions, 2010-11 to 2018-19 (US\$ Millions)**

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Source: Authors' calculations based on Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India Database

Investment ties between India and Africa are strengthening, with the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region playing a central role. While Indian officials highlight these investments, the reality is more complex. The Ministry of External Affairs reports India as the fifth largest investor in Africa, with investments exceeding \$54 billion (Tirumurti, 2019). However, this data is distorted due to investments in Mauritius, a tax haven, where much of the capital is reinvested back into India (Chakrabarty, 2018).

From 2012 to 2016, Mauritius accounted for approximately 86% of Indian FDI to Africa. Excluding Mauritius, significant Indian investments are concentrated in a few African countries, primarily from large public or private enterprises.

Mozambique, another WIO nation, is the second-largest recipient, primarily due to public sector investments in oil, gas, and coal. South Africa, also in the WIO region, ranks third, with investments from the TATA group in hotels, steel, IT, and consumer goods sectors (Chaudhry, Tomar and Joshi, 2018).

Examining bidirectional investments between Africa and India reveals the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region as a major source of capital inflow to India. From April 2000 to June 2022, Mauritius emerged as India's leading investor, contributing \$160 billion, which accounted for 26% of total investments in India during this period.

Other significant investors from the WIO region included South Africa (approximately \$590 million), Seychelles (\$218 million), and Mozambique (about \$16 million) (MOCI, 2022). These

figures underscore that the investment narrative between India and Africa is predominantly centered on the WIO region.

Although the concept of Indo-Pacific is still evolving, it has already become a powerful narrative in the last few years. Diplomatically, countries are trying to define its relevance in various ways. Depending on the national interests and strategic priorities countries are defining geographical boundaries of the Indo Pacific. However, the centrality of that narrative is to build some coalitions, forums, platforms which can somehow balance the impact of rising and assertive China. And within this narrative, India becomes important. First, because of its important role in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is a key component of the Indo Pacific construct and India plays an important role in the Indian Ocean. Secondly, compared to other countries in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS), India is not an alliance partner of the United States. So far, the major focus of the narrative has been towards East and Southeast Asia, perhaps mainly because of concentration of actions to rebalance China. However, for India, the WIO part of the Indo-Pacific narrative is equally important. Through various strategies and announcements, Indian policy makers are also giving significant attention to the WIO part of the Indo-Pacific story.

### *Infrastructure Connectivity*

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While the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific has traditionally been shaped by alliances, the true battleground is now in connectivity strategies. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has dominated conversations in recent years, but numerous other significant initiatives are also progressing. In addition to the ASEAN connectivity plan, countries like Japan, India, and South Korea have developed their own strategies. The European Union has introduced its Europe-Asia connectivity and Global Gateway strategy. The Quad nations have established an infrastructure partnership, and both the G7 and G20 have laid out principles for sustainable connectivity. Each of these frameworks varies in terms of their origins, priorities, resource commitments, and partnerships, with all of them having strong links to either the Indo-Pacific region or the BRI.

Major infrastructure projects can be viewed from multiple angles. The developmental perspective emphasizes the economic benefits these projects bring to participating countries. Historically, numerous regional infrastructure initiatives within Europe and Asia, under their regional cooperation or integration frameworks, have been championed for their economic advantages. However, in the past two decades, many large-scale infrastructure projects and strategies have also been scrutinized through a geopolitical lens. This scrutiny is evident in the United States' New Silk Road Strategy (NSRS), the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Countries like India and the United States, among others, primarily view the BRI from a geopolitical standpoint. As the relationship between Russia and China strengthens, both nations are working to integrate their infrastructure strategies. Likewise, the EU, Japan, and the United States are striving to forge connectivity partnerships with like-minded countries, either bilaterally or through the G7 grouping.

In the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region, maritime connectivity has become a significant geopolitical concern, particularly for India. China's expanding trade, energy transport, and investments have heightened its interest in the Indian Ocean. Critical sea lanes through the Malacca



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Strait, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea are vital for China's growing energy and raw material needs. The Indian Ocean littoral states are also gaining importance due to increasing Chinese investments and expatriate populations (US China Commission, 2016). China's maritime expansion is part of its broader strategy to economically integrate various Indo-Pacific regions with its own economy (Sachdeva 2021). Consequently, China has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean, investing in strategic ports across South and Southeast Asia. This extends beyond the immediate region, with Chinese investment or ownership in nearly two-thirds of the world's 50 major ports (Malik, 2018). Furthermore, China has been deploying an increasing number of surface warships and submarines to the Indian Ocean region.

The potential for commercial ports to be repurposed for military use has raised concerns among Indian policymakers and analysts regarding China's "string of pearls" strategy in South Asia (Suri, 2017). India, viewing itself as a leading power in the Indian Ocean, currently maintains a significant advantage over China in the region. While China seeks a peaceful maritime environment in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) to support its economic expansion, this area may become a zone of increased competition between India and other powers. China, however, portrays these investments as purely commercial endeavours and might welcome additional Indian investments in WIO ports, as this could enhance China's own regional connectivity.

In response to China's maritime connectivity initiatives, India has developed its own strategic approach. This includes strengthening its presence in the Indian Ocean by securing preferential access to bases in Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Oman, and Iran; conducting joint naval exercises in strategic waters like the East and South China Seas. India has also established logistics exchange agreements with the US, Singapore and France to access naval bases across the Indo-Pacific region, while simultaneously launching a significant naval expansion program (Malik, 2018). Furthermore, India has enhanced its development cooperation with littoral states. In an effort to revitalize historical cultural and trade routes in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi introduced its own doctrine known as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

Although European countries, the US, and Japan have long been heavily involved in financing infrastructure projects, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has heightened geopolitical concerns. The potential dual-use nature of infrastructure, where ports and airports could serve both commercial and military purposes, has contributed to these worries. This has led to the development of competing infrastructure strategies. The rising prominence of the BRI is prompting proponents of these plans in the Indo-Pacific to formulate convergence strategies that emphasize transparency, sustainable financing, and high-quality infrastructure. Japan is now collaborating with the EU and India on sustainable connectivity and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, respectively. Additionally, Japan has agreed to work with the US and Australia. India has also established a connectivity partnership with the EU.

In response to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), official statements and speeches from the Quad nations and the European Union often highlight global norms such as financial responsibility, transparency, debt management, environmental sustainability, and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity (MEA, 2017). These references, though indirect, are aimed at Chinese infrastructure projects in the region. Such concerns are now commonly addressed in bilateral and multilateral forums, including the G7 and G20 meetings. Additionally, the EU has begun to

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emphasize these issues during its global engagements and has developed its own connectivity and Indo-Pacific strategies to address them.

The Quad nations have been independently and collaboratively pursuing their connectivity strategies. In September 2021, they formally introduced a “Quad infrastructure partnership.” This initiative aims to “cooperate to provide technical assistance, empowering regional partners with evaluative tools, and will promote sustainable infrastructure development.” The partnership also highlights the “importance of supporting open, fair, and transparent lending practices in line with international rules and standards for major creditor countries, including on debt sustainability and accountability, and call on all creditors to adhere to these rules and standards” (The White House, 2021).

India’s various activities connected to maritime security in the WIO region will have to be synchronised with infrastructure connectivity. As outlined by Mishra (2019), India have developed various cooperation mechanisms with the WIO countries. These include Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), and Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar. Similarly, bilaterally, India has developed significant cooperation maritime issues. The cooperation is taking place in the forms of, conducting anti-piracy patrol, training of naval personnel, defence officers, and civilian personnel engaged in maritime administration, conducting Hydrographic Surveys and WIO nations developing basic capabilities in hydrography etc. Due to limited resource allocation, time overruns and weak coordination, the impact has been limited. (for details see Mishra 2019). Moreover, India also collaborates with WIO nations through Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Since Chinese strategic activities in the region are also supported by its broader BRI projects, India also needs to link these activities with infrastructure connectivity projects. Since maritime infrastructure financing may involve significant resources, India may need to find like-minded partners to implement some of these projects in the WIO region.

The *UK-India Roadmap 2030* ( MEA 2021) has talked about exploring initiatives to “improve connectivity between India and the UK and seek synergies between our cooperation on connectivity projects with third countries including in the Indo-Pacific region”. Since both are busy negotiating bilateral trade agreement at the moment, no major connectivity initiative in any third country has been announced so far. The WIO region is certainly one area where India and the UK can work together in maritime connectivity or related fields. Similarly, in the context of Indo-Pacific region, India and France have agreed that both “will continue to develop new partnerships in various formats with like-minded countries in the region and within regional organisations” (MEA 2022a). Besides, they will “work together in the implementation of the India-EU Connectivity Partnership”. Japan is also lead connectivity partner in India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPOI) ( MEA 2022b), which was announced by Prime Minister Modi in 2019. Seven pillars of the IPOI include maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; and trade connectivity and maritime transport (MEA 2020).



### *India-WIO Development Partnership*

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Development partnerships with African nations have become a central component of India's strategy and external economic policy. This shift may be partly attributed to China's growing influence in the region. India's approach is evident in long-established institutional mechanisms and specific development cooperation initiatives, projects, and soft credit lines. These activities, particularly in India's neighbouring countries and Africa, align with the broader framework of South-South Cooperation (SSC). India's development efforts abroad primarily encompass lines of credit (LOCs), capacity-building programs, and grant assistance projects. As of March 2020, the EXIM Bank had established 288 LOCs across more than sixty countries in Africa, Asia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Latin America, with credit commitments totalling approximately US\$ 29.6 billion (India Exim Bank, 2019). A significant portion of these LOCs are directed towards African countries. Within the WIO region, the Indian government has provided LOCs worth about US\$ 5 billion so far. Major LOC recipient countries in the WIO region include Maldives (\$ 1330 million), Tanzania (\$1115 million) Mauritius ( \$954 million), Mozambique (\$772 million) Kenya ( \$206 million), Comoros (\$ 42 million) and Seychelles (\$16 million) (Exim Bank Database, nd). Another \$ 500 million LOCs are under negotiation. These include a \$300 million metro project in Mauritius, 100 million defence related projects in Madagascar and \$100 million for upgradation projects in Maldives. India has recently expanded its approach to include triangular cooperation with other partners in Africa. Collaborating with the US, India has committed to joint agricultural projects in several African countries including Botswana, DR Congo, Ghana, Kenya, and others (USAID, n.d.). In partnership with Japan, India has launched the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), an infrastructure initiative focusing on development cooperation, quality infrastructure, institutional connectivity, capacity enhancement, and people-to-people partnerships. The AAGC aims to align with African countries' development priorities, targeting areas such as health, agriculture, disaster management, skill development, and connectivity. India is also exploring similar triangular projects with the European Union. Some experts suggest that individual EU member states, like Germany, could potentially engage in triangular projects with India in Africa (Wagner, 2019).

Traditionally, India used to be very important recipient of British aid. This relationship is totally transformed now. In the last two decades, this relationship has grown into global partnerships for development, particularly in Africa. In recent years, the UK government agencies have supported many of the triangular projects implemented through the Indian government, civil society or the private sector. To institutionalise many of these actions, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and DFID signed the “Statement of Intent on Partnership for Cooperation in Third Countries” in 2015. Some of the major initiatives include DFID-TERI Partnership ( 2011-15), Knowledge Partnership Programme ( 2012-16), Strategic Health and Nutrition Partnership ( 2013-18), Innovative Ventures and Technologies for Development ( 2013-19), Global Research Partnership on Food and Nutrition Security, Health & Women ( 2013-20), Supporting Indian Trade and Investment for Africa (SITA Africa, 2014-2020). Some of these projects were also implemented in the WIO region including in Kenya and Tanzania ( For details see Mittal, 2020 and Paulo 2018).

### **Possible Minilateralism in the WIO**

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The post-pandemic and post-Ukraine war world may be a different world altogether. The world order was already in transition. These two developments have accelerated this change. The western

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world order under the leadership of the United States is already weakened. China is expanding and asserting. Many European nations are talking about strategic autonomy. Similarly, India's hope for an alternative norm building through the BRICS are low today. However, suspicions about Beijing are also growing. Multilateral institutions including the WHO, WTO and the UN, have proved less effective during the pandemic, trade tensions and Ukraine war. Due to limited effectiveness of regional and multilateral institutions, there has been a rise of minilateral institutions. These smaller groups have an advantage over broader regional and multilateral forums due to limited like-minded membership and focused agenda ( see Singh and Teo 2020) Similar to many other countries, India has also started using minilateral engagements as part of its foreign policy tools.

The Indo-Pacific region has seen establishment of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad); Australia-France-India trilateral ministerial dialogue; Australia, India and Indonesia trilateral; Malabar naval exercisers; and the Australia, UK and the USA (AUKUS). These minilaterals deal not just with security related matters but also issues like climate change, supply chain resilience, infrastructure, critical technologies and health issues (Rajagopalan 2021). This has been clearly the case with the Quad. In an attempt to rebalance China's assertive rise, the focus of these groupings has been mainly East and South East Asia. There is however, relatively little similar activity in the WIO region. Since India's security and economic interests are clearly linked with the WIO region, it has improved its bilateral engagements significantly. It also has a strong strategic partnership with South Africa. Besides, wherever possible, it has aligned its activities with multilateral agencies. Due to strong Chinese and Russian presence, objectives of BRICS grouping may be entirely different from the objectives of the Indo-Pacific narrative. The IBSA grouping works within the broader context of South-South Cooperation but not directed towards any particular region of the world.

Since the WIO region is becoming important, India may like to work with like-minded partners in specific areas of cooperation in the region. As India's foreign policy now follows a multi-alignment format, it is ready to work with different sets of players in various parts of the world. Going by the activities of recent years, there is a potential to work for a few minilaterals involving India, France, South Africa, Mauritius, Maldives, Kenya, Tanzania, Japan, UK and the USA.

A large number of bilateral and multilateral activities in the area of maritime security are already happening in the WIO region. There is already certain bilateral and multilateral institutional framework in operation in the area of counter piracy operations. It may not be easy to formulate a superior minilateral format say involving India, UK, France and one or two key countries like Somalia. However, in case of maritime capacity building initiative, minilateral format could provide some extra benefits.

The other area in which a minilateral setting could be useful is development cooperation. So far, most of the development assistance programmes are either bilateral or triangular cooperation in which normally a country from the North partners with a Southern country to implement projects in a developing country. As mentioned earlier, India has already started this kind of cooperation with the UK and the USA in some of the countries in the WIO. An imaginative minilateral involving say India, South Africa, UK, France as well as specific WIO countries could be formed. This will be an interesting combination of countries working together to achieve larger SDG goals in the WIO. India and the UK have already established a strong cooperation in this area including in some of the countries in the WIO.

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Infrastructure connectivity minilateral could be another useful way of countries working together in the WIO. In the developing economic framework of the Indo-Pacific, nearly every significant country in the region has established its own connectivity plans, either independently or as part of multilateral initiatives. These connectivity strategies have become integral to national or regional policies amidst the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific. Such initiatives could offer alternatives to Western Indian Ocean (WIO) countries that are drawn to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Notably, India has been collaborating with the European Union through a connectivity partnership and with Japan via the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. The Quad nations have developed their own infrastructure partnership, and both the G7 and G20 have articulated their principles for sustainable connectivity. Within the WIO an imaginative infrastructure minilateral could be formed between India, UK, France, Mauritius, Maldives etc. Due to the geographical location within the Indian Ocean, immediate focus is likely to ports, special economic zones and other maritime infrastructure.

India, UK and some of the WIO countries could also concentrate on health and education matters. India and UK have successfully collaborated in vaccine development and both have provided vaccines to many of the countries in the region. A large number of students from the WIO countries are also attracted towards the UK and India.

Many of the issues discussed above are cross cutting issues. For example development cooperation, infrastructure connectivity and maritime capacity building cannot be discussed in isolation. So it might be useful to identify potential countries and many of these issues could be put together on the minilateral agenda. Overall, the minilaterals in the WIO could be formed in three different ways. In the first category India and the UK could work out specific issues with key countries where they have strong historical linkages like Kenya, Maldives, Mauritius and South Africa. In the second category India, UK and France could work out within a more extended circle. A larger minilateral for a particular sector like infrastructure connectivity could also be worked with other like-minded countries like Japan and the USA.

### *Conclusion*

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Within the Indo-Pacific narrative and increasing Chinese profile in India's neighbourhood, the WIO region has emerged as an important area of strategic engagement for New Delhi. Historically, India has dealt with the East and South African countries bordering the Indian Ocean within the broader framework of South-South Cooperation. The India-Africa summit meetings and Prime Minister Modi's Africa policy has sharpened these engagements. Some of these interactions have happened through IORA, G20, BRICS, IBSA and SAARC. As maritime security cooperation has become an important area of concern, India has upgraded bilateral maritime cooperation with almost all WIO countries and also started participating in multilateral initiatives. It has also developed cooperation mechanism with CMF, CGPCS, DCoC and RMIFC. Similar to the Southeast and East Asia part of the Indo-Pacific, there is also a need to work out for some minilateral arrangements in specific areas viz. maritime security cooperation, physical infrastructure, development cooperation and health and people contacts. Most of these issues are

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identified by India-UK *Roadmap 2030* as well as under India-France *Roadmap on the Blue Economy and Ocean Governance*. India and UK are already working together in the area of development cooperation through triangular cooperation in some of the countries in the WIO region. By bringing maritime security and infrastructure connectivity into India-UK cooperation in the WIO region, the scope can be widened. While working with South Africa, Kenya, Mauritius and Tanzania, this could become an important minilateral in the WIO region of the Indo-Pacific. The scope can be further widened with expanding partnership to France and Japan. Coming of these powers together will provide proper legitimacy, resources and geopolitical backing to the grouping.

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