



Options for Australia, France and India trilateral cooperation

Building an Indian Ocean partnership

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Key points

- A revived Australia-France partnership opens the door for cooperation in a broader web of Indo-Pacific relations, including among Australia, France and India.
- The three countries can work together to facilitate regional cooperation, especially in the Indian Ocean.
- This trilateral partnership should go beyond traditional security and focus on global threats in areas such as the environment, disaster management and transnational crime.

Key recommendations

- The partnership should facilitate enhanced Indian Ocean regional cooperation in disaster management. This could be modelled on the success of the France, Australia and New Zealand (FRANZ) Arrangement for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief support in the Pacific.
- The three countries should sponsor an Indian Ocean Operational Oil Spill Forecast, Warning and Mitigation System to respond to major oil spills.
- They should work with Indian Ocean regional organisations to build capabilities in monitoring, control and surveillance arrangements to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.
- The three, working in conjunction with regional states, can use their complementary capabilities to reduce security risks to undersea communications cables.

French and Australian leaders have expressed the desire for both countries to reset their relationship following the controversy over Australia's termination of its French submarine project. Despite the controversy, strong imperatives remain for them to cooperate across the Indo-Pacific, particularly in their shared maritime domain.

Alongside the prospects for greater bilateral cooperation, an enhanced Australia-France relationship could strengthen a broader web of Indo-Pacific partnerships. Among the most significant of these is the trilateral Australia, France, India relationship, reflecting their convergent interests in the Indo-Pacific. All want to see a stable and prosperous region that is relatively

resilient to major power coercion and the impacts of climate change.

These three Indian Ocean states could facilitate regional cooperation and provide public goods in relation to a range of threats. These should focus on 'non-traditional' security challenges such as environmental security and disaster management. As active Indian Ocean states, Australia, France and India can coordinate their efforts across an ocean that often lacks effective regional action.¹ The three countries can provide critical expertise and capabilities across the Indian Ocean, and in key sub-regions such as the Arabian Sea, Southwest Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal.

The three countries have held trilateral dialogues at ministerial level since 2020. Although these went into abeyance following the announcement of the AUKUS technology sharing arrangement, they resumed in September 2022 and trilateral discussions may soon be held at the leaders' level. Building an effective trilateral partnership will require mechanisms for coordination at the political and official level, ideally underpinned by frequent dialogues among experts from the three countries.

This paper canvases several initiatives that Australia, France and India can pursue to build inclusive regional security in the Indian Ocean by leveraging their regional influence and capabilities.

Specific proposals in this paper include trilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean on:

- regional disaster response
- developing a regional oil spill modelling and response system
- enhancing fisheries management
- protection of undersea cables.

Regional disaster management arrangements²

The Indian Ocean is highly vulnerable to a range of natural and man-made disasters, but it also has the least well-integrated coordination arrangements for disaster response. This will likely only worsen. According to the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, the Indian Ocean is home to 14 of the 20 countries most affected by climate change.³

The scale and diversity of the region militates against a single regional arrangement for disaster preparedness, prevention, response and recovery. This means that multiple and potentially overlapping arrangements are required to ensure rapid and flexible response to the full range of contingencies.

Some valuable initiatives exist – such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System under UNESCO – but they don't form the basis of an effective regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) architecture covering a range of risks.

Although the Australian, French and Indian foreign ministers agreed in 2021 to encourage information sharing between their HADR agencies, as yet there is no standing arrangement to enable these exchanges.

A working-level model for improved communication already exists in the Pacific through the France, Australia and New Zealand (FRANZ) partnership on HADR. The FRANZ arrangements are relatively informal and do not require a standing organisation, but are widely seen as a successful arrangement for practical cooperation between the three countries and Pacific Island states, supplementing existing regional arrangements for disaster preparedness and response. These arrangements help better prepare for disasters, share information, coordinate relief efforts and engage with other regional partners.

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There is also potential for the Indian-led Indian Ocean Region Information Fusion Centre, where Australia and France have liaison officers, to play an enhanced role in disaster management.

A trilateral arrangement between Australia, France and India could provide a foundation to develop more robust regional architecture, while retaining flexibility and a working-level approach in the Indian Ocean region.

Building an oil spill modelling and mitigation system for the Indian Ocean⁴

Recent shipping accidents near Sri Lanka, Maldives and Mauritius serve as a reminder of the vulnerability of Indian Ocean states to oil spills. Every year, some 120,000 tankers cross the Indian Ocean, passing many island and other littoral states that are highly dependent on fishing and maritime tourism. A large oil spill could result in environmental and economic disaster for many of those countries, particularly small island states.

But these recent incidents demonstrate that for much of the Indian Ocean, spill contingency planning systems are relatively ineffective. An effective regional oil spill mitigation system is required. One of the most critical elements is a modelling system for predicting the flow of oil spills.

Among Indian Ocean states, Australia, France and India have the strongest capabilities in this area. The three countries could work together to establish an Indian Ocean Operational Oil Spill Forecast, Warning and Mitigation System. This could be modelled on features of the successful Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System established following the 2004 Tsunami.

Such a system could involve:

- joint collaborative mechanisms between coastal states
- nation-specific emergency plan strategies
- spill modelling.

Australia, France and India can combine their resources and expertise to sponsor a regional system. This would bring together national agencies and industry groups where expertise in forecast oil spill modelling and systems for management, treatment and mitigation is already at an advanced state. This project could, for example, be undertaken as part of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.

Indian Ocean fisheries governance⁵

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing exacerbates unsustainable fisheries practices in the Indian Ocean, likely magnified by the impact of climate change. A study of selected species representing about half of the total of Indian Ocean catches asserted that 16 per cent to 34 per cent of catches were either illegal or unreported.⁶

IUU fishing is problematic at several levels. It contributes to food insecurity and increases the vulnerability of coastal communities. It is a key national security threat for many small island states and littorals in the Indian Ocean. It also undermines maritime governance through the interconnections between IUU fishing and other illegal activities such as human trafficking, forced labour, piracy and illegal trade.

It is now also emerging as a geopolitical challenge, with large distant water fishing fleets from outside the region plundering Indian Ocean marine resources. China plays a specific role in this context, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Its trawlers are active throughout the region, from Indian waters to the coast of Africa, with potential strategic consequences that go beyond fishing.⁷

IUU fishing in the Indian Ocean is growing because of weaknesses in monitoring, control and surveillance arrangements. Australia, France and India could work together to reduce the space for IUU fishing by building on existing multilateral institutions and mobilising stakeholders to reduce gaps in existing mechanisms in this space. Helping regional states deal with IUU fishing is effectively helping them to defend their maritime sovereignty.

France's freedom of action on IUU fishing is bound by the prerogatives of the European Commission, it can act independently only on maritime law enforcement. But this should not prevent Australia, France and India from making the political case for a more effective policy against IUU fishing.

Indian Ocean states currently experience difficulties having their voices heard on the international stage on IUU fishing. Publicity on the issue by Australia, France and India, three countries of global standing, will help Indian Ocean states find voice while strengthening the role these three countries play in the Indian Ocean.

Although combatting IUU fishing involves measures that need to be decided at the multilateral level, some effective initiatives could be taken at a trilateral level. These include:

- commissioning a baseline report on IUU fishing, as well as on the effectiveness of existing monitoring, control and surveillance measures
- leveraging the Indian Ocean Rim Association to help eliminate regulatory gaps in national jurisdictions
- promoting the creation of an independent scientific body for the Indian Ocean to help separate science and politics in addressing sustainable fishing
- facilitating information sharing between Indian Ocean states
- encouraging the sharing of expertise of Pacific Islands with Indian Ocean states on combatting illegal fishing
- publicising the problem to help mobilise domestic opinion in Indian Ocean states to strengthen government hands in dealing with foreign governments and firms

- using regional information fusion centres in India, Madagascar and Singapore to help identify trends, challenges, gaps and new developments in IUU fishing.

Protection of undersea cables⁸

Submarine cables form the backbone of modern communications infrastructure. In the Indo-Pacific, submarine cables carry over 95 percent of international data including telephone and data communications traffic. The Indian Ocean, as home to some of the world's fastest growing economies, is driving the growth of undersea communication cable networks. Undersea power cables will also likely become important sources of power for many countries. These cables are vulnerable to a variety of threats, which pose grave security and economic consequences.

There are many instances of submarine cable failures in recent years, caused by natural hazards, negligence, and intentional acts. Somalia was left without internet for three weeks in 2017, parts of Egypt and India were cut off in 2008, and Tonga was disconnected for several weeks in 2019 and 2022. There have been multiple recent examples of unexplained cutting of communications cables in the Atlantic/Mediterranean,⁹ in addition to Russia's alleged involvement in destroying the Nord-stream gas pipelines.

As China has emerged as a major Indo-Pacific cable supplier, risks of espionage and industrial sabotage have also grown.

Australia, France and India, working in conjunction with regional states, can do much to reduce security risks to cables. While submarine cables are generally laid, owned and maintained by the private sector, governments have a responsibility to ensure the infrastructure conforms to security standards, and that there is sufficient redundancy to ensure resilience.

Australia, France and India have unique and complementary capabilities with regards to undersea cables. In 2022, France adopted an official strategy for sea-bed security, including the protection of communications and power cables.¹⁰ The French-based Alcatel Submarine Networks is a major supplier of communications cables and along with Orange Marine makes France a lead player in cable repairs. Australia has been at the forefront of efforts to create regulatory frameworks for the protection of undersea cables and for cybersecurity of critical infrastructure. India's strategic location in proximity to key trans-oceanic cables and its skilled workforce makes it an attractive regional hub for cable laying and repairs.

Cooperative initiatives could include:

- assisting island states through public-private partnerships that provide affordable financing as well as assistance to design, build and operate new cables

- exploring opportunities to create a regional hub in south India for cable laying and repair
- working together in the International Cable Protection Committee on international standards for the security of undersea cables
- facilitating information sharing by regional states on suspected cable attacks and anomalies, and cooperation in the event of disruptions occurring outside territorial waters
- sponsoring regional desktop exercises on cable breaks combining government and industry representatives to develop protocols for responses to cable disruptions
- sponsoring capacity – building workshops with the officials of vulnerable states.

Conclusion

As Australia, France and India develop their Indo-Pacific engagement, trilateral cooperation would provide an excellent platform for coordination and implementation of regional initiatives.

The initiatives set out in this paper address key threats in the Indian Ocean where the three countries share many interests. Despite some recent setbacks, underlying imperatives for cooperation between Australia and France have again come to the fore. France and Australia are two of India's most important maritime partnerships and so it makes particular sense for them to work together.

The convergence of interests between the three countries provides an opportunity for them to address many shared challenges, particularly environmental or transnational threats. Indeed, a trilateral partnership holds the potential to become one of the most crucial and effective collaborations in the Indo-Pacific.

Notes

1. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/02/we-re-thinking-about-indian-ocean-all-wrong-pub-87028>
2. This section draws from an unpublished paper: Alan Ryan, *A Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement to Coordinate Disaster Preparedness and Response in the Indian Ocean Region*.
3. <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>
4. This section draws from an unpublished paper: Nick D'Adamo and Ray Steedman, *Australia-India-France Trilateral Cooperation in an Indian Ocean Operational Oil Spill Forecast, Warning and Mitigation System*.
5. This section draws from an unpublished paper: Frederic Grare, *IUU Fishing: A Trilateral Initiative in the Indian Ocean*.
6. Agnew et al, "Estimating the Worldwide Extent of Illegal Fishing" *PLOS One* (2009) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0004570>.
7. David Brewster, "Chinese fishing fleet a security issue for Australia" *Lowy Interpreter*, 7 November 2018. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-fishing-fleet-security-issue-australia>
8. This section draws from an unpublished paper, Samuel Bashfield, Anthony Bergin and Amrut Godbole: *Submarine Cables: Trilateral Australia, India, France Cooperation*
9. "Damaged cable leaves Shetland cut off from mainland" *BBC News*, 20 October 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-63326102>
10. "France's Deep Dive into seabed warfare" *IJSS*, 25 February 2022. <https://www.ijss.org/blogs/military-balance/2022/02/frances-deep-dive-into-seabed-warfare>

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