



The Madagascar in the Indo-Pacific Striving for a Survival Strategy?

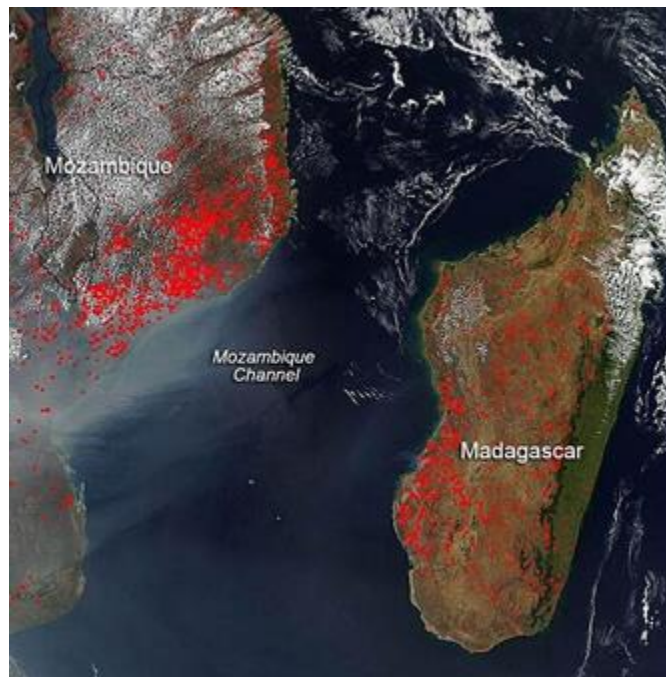


Figure 1: Madagascar Picture Courtesy: *The World Factbook 2021*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2021.

Abstract

Historically, Madagascar has had a strong French presence, and contemporaneously, its strategic location bordering the Mozambique Channel has also attracted the attention of other great powers. Additionally, Madagascar has been subject to *eco-power*, which is currently controlled essentially by international actors making the country more susceptible to great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. Notably, emerging countries in the past have used strategic islands for power projection. It has been propounded that island, including Madagascar, “will shape the new framework for a security architecture”

in the future, which concomitantly combines its unique “difficult histories, complex identities, regional associations, and future aspirations” into the regional calculus that great powers must consider. However, besieged by a plague induced by climate change and all the while swaying in the rapidly charging currents of the Indo-Pacific, Madagascar holds a precarious geopolitical position in the region. The island has inherited rich minerals—including nickel, cobalt, and ilmenite, and other natural resources—yet it remains one of the least competitive nations on the continent. This has provided the opportunity for aid and investment from other countries, such as Japan, China, and Russia. At the same time, the United States retains its position as one of the largest bilateral donors to Madagascar. Meanwhile, increased dependence on Chinese trade and commerce and Chinese products has been witnessed in the Vanilla Islands. Madagascar has seen Chinese conglomerates such as China Communications Constructions Company Ltd. offering exorbitant conditions and involvement of companies from China being enmeshed in illegal fishing in Malagasy territorial waters.

Island nations located in the western Indian Ocean are experiencing a rise in great-power politics in the region. These island nations—though immensely rich in resources, flora, and fauna—have seen challenges emanating from economic inequalities, in part, due to neocolonialism and, to some extent, to domestic political instability. This has permitted the traditional powers and great powers to carve their own place in the region through these island nations to further their own national interests. Traditionally, Madagascar, an important small island nation in the Indo-Pacific, has been a focal point for strategists due to its geopolitical location and access. However, as the great-power competition intensifies and the Indo-Pacific becomes an indispensable theater, the importance of Madagascar cannot be overstated.

Madagascar, a former French colony subject to British machinations and US interest, has long been embroiled in and subject to the influence of great powers. However, recent instability in the country in the aftermath of the 2009

coups and then subsequent natural hazards has put the country in the crosshairs of the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific due to its glaring vulnerabilities, strategic location, and resource potential. Furthermore, the United States is one of the leading bilateral donors to Madagascar, as USAID and the Peace Corps are active in the country. Additionally, the US defense establishment is deemed essential in the construction of “maritime security capacity building projects for the Malagasy military.”¹

Madagascar is instrumental in ensuring freedom of navigation, particularly access to the Mozambique Channel, a critical chokepoint.² Furthermore, Madagascar is a security, economic, and developmental partner for countries in the Indo-Pacific such as India and France. The country is influential in the small island developing states (SIDS) that have seen interest from the United States, Russia, and China.³ Notably, there has been increased focus on South-South cooperation,⁴ sustainable development, fishing, and renewable energy under the Blue Economy initiative that has attracted Madagascar and that has been part of the agenda of the maturing constructs such as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) countries, which, if properly implemented, could lead to increased inclusivity and resilience.

This article will attempt to understand the priorities of Madagascar, to explore the island’s institutional linkages with great powers, to assess Madagascar’s strategic role in the great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific, and evaluate the future challenges and prospects faced by Madagascar in the region as great-power competition intensifies, including through partnerships and multilateral engagements.

Priorities of Madagascar

Security

Madagascar, the largest island in Africa, is situated on the east of the continent and is in the western Indian Ocean, making it extremely well

positioned in the Indo-Pacific to protect maritime interests and safeguard the naval assets of its partner nations. Contemporaneously, Antananarivo has had to take into consideration the protection of vital sea lanes of communication (SLOC) in the western Indian Ocean that are subject to traditional and nontraditional threats. The effective deterrence of these threats requires better maritime domain awareness capabilities, maritime surveillance, satellite remote sensing, antipiracy operations, and capacity building. The Malagasy naval forces' structural weakness and limited maritime regional cooperation exacerbate these threats. Notably, the Madagascar People's Armed Forces must protect the nation's coastline, contiguous zone, territorial sea, and exclusive economic zone, despite these structural vulnerabilities. Furthermore, Antananarivo is in dispute with France pertaining to the Scattered Islands, which has posed a substantial concern for Madagascar as well.⁵ All these factors have contributed to making security a priority for any administration in the country.

Development

To fund development, Antananarivo must focus on key projects certain to generate capital and reduce the island's reliance on great powers—donors with debatable motivations—in Madagascar's quest to enhance its security. To that end, Madagascar and Mauritius aspire to construct and participate in a regional maritime shipping line joint venture that will maximize freight revenue. For development purposes, the government is likely to focus on undersea resources exploration as well. The nation needs infrastructure, particularly electrically powered transportation, along with increasing its processing capability of raw materials, which has prompted the government to start the Madagascar Emergence Initiative, hoping to garner the involvement of more benign powers such as Japan and India.

Ocean Diplomacy, Climate Mitigation, and Adaption

Issues such as reef conservation, marine biodiversity, maritime disaster response, and marine pollution remediation have become essential priorities of island nations such as Madagascar, particularly, as climate change threatens their national economy and aspirations. This has prompted the need for greater climate mitigation and adaptation strategies to be implemented and has provided a niche for developed countries that are leaders in research and development in climate change-related policies and technologies. Experts posit that 90 percent of Madagascar's biodiversity is unique in the world.⁶ However, the country is subject to various risks, including natural hazards such as droughts and cyclones, which are reported to be increasing in their intensity. This has led the government of Madagascar to craft a national policy that aims to respond to these changes. Nevertheless, the country faces many challenges, and Antananarivo must grapple with finite resource allocation, which provides opportunities for external power, great and middle alike.

Institutional Linkages with Great Powers

Great powers have not been impervious to Madagascar's enormous food insecurity challenges. The nation is dependent on rice cultivation, and China has been forging linkages based on the crop's cultivation by means of providing access to "quality seeds and technical training." Beijing has approved the establishment of a hybrid rice demonstration center overseen by the Hunan Academy of Agricultural Sciences. The island is among the "10 major agricultural demonstration zones to be built by China for African countries" as part of China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation obligations. Subsequently, both countries have deepened relations through China- Food and Agriculture Organization South-South Cooperation Program Madagascar Project.⁷

China engages in development projects such as drilling in water-scarce areas such as southern Madagascar. Other areas of Chinese involvement in Madagascar encompass healthcare, particularly in the wake of a plague that dogged Madagascar in 2017. Notably, Beijing has worked on "integrating its

foreign cooperation projects with Madagascar's development strategy.” China has focused on technical training and humanitarian assistance.⁸ However, these relations have not completely superseded the human rights violations that have been lodged against Chinese firms. The lure of “multinationals, technology transfer and access to global markets” along with an alternative to the Washington Consensus have been tough for the government to overcome.⁹ China has contributed to the National Library of Madagascar to garner immense goodwill through soft power. Additionally, China has been trying to build on the perception that as developing, colonized countries, China and Madagascar have shared convergences.

China has launched Confucius Institutes at the University of Antananarivo and the University of Toamasina and further deepened relations in the cultural dimensions coupled with cultural exchanges. There is also a considerable Chinese diaspora on the island nation to cement lasting ties.¹⁰ This has led to concerns pertaining to activities of the United Front, a Chinese Communist Party organization that engages in “foco” strategy, and Beijing’s attempts to harness “diaspora communities, in particular, [which threatens] to exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions, aggravate problems of political and social polarization.”¹¹

At the same time, to elicit greater cooperation, Madagascar participates in the Africa–EU multidimensional policy framework.¹² In the past, Madagascar also participated in MARSIC and Critical Maritime Routes Law Enforcement Agencies (CRIMLEA) I, launched under the European Union’s Critical Maritime Routes (CMR) program, wherein the objective included the creation of regional synergies and maritime security. The European Union has signed economic partnership agreements (EPA) with Madagascar and adopted the Regional Indicative Program (RIP) for Eastern Africa, Southern Africa, and the Indian Ocean, which works within the framework of the 11th European 2014–2020 National Indicative Program for Madagascar. Another agreement is Interreg V–

Mayotte-Comores-Madagascar, 2014–2020 program, which aims to implement sustainable development in Madagascar.¹³

Regarding New Delhi's approach toward these island countries amid great-power competition, many counterinitiatives have come into place vis-à-vis belligerent Beijing. New Delhi has tried to use soft-power leverages through initiatives such as the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR),¹⁴ Project Mausam, and the SagarMala¹⁵ port development project so that the exchange of goods, ideas, and knowledge becomes more robust, broadening cultural, educational, economic, and academic exchanges among smaller island countries such as Madagascar, Comoros, and Seychelles. India has also provided support to Madagascar through enhancing its irrigation facilities along with augmenting the island's mechanized farming, while extending a line of credit to the country.

Madagascar's Strategic Role in Great-Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific

Many observers regard the Indo-Pacific region as a “global center of gravity that engages” various great powers and middle powers that are determined to “embrace and promote the centrality” of the region. States are actively working to “to balance the competition and shape the maritime architecture,” while being cognizant of and actively countering the challenges posed by China. However, differences continue to proliferate, including regarding the definition of the *Indo-Pacific* concept itself, as different states describe it differently. However, Africa has increasingly gained inclusion in the Indo-Pacific strategies of various countries that have established bases in the region and endeavor to establish better relations with African countries. This has prompted African nations that are a part of the Indo-Pacific to become more involved in the regional geopolitical alignments that are currently in flux, particularly as multilateralism in the region takes a more concrete shape.¹⁶ Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese were incredibly cognizant of

perceptions based on negative stereotypes and provided Sinopharm vaccines to Madagascar.¹⁷ Beijing also provided Madagascar with healthcare aid and medical kits, oxygenators, and ventilators. China has taken a multidimensional approach and invested in the development of the Port of Toamasina (Tamatave) deep water port, a vital resource for an island nation.

China has unmatched diplomatic missions in the island nations of the Indian Ocean. These islands nations include Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros. This becomes extremely important from a strategic point of view as these littoral nations can offer advantages that encompass a bridgehead into the region for better access and to achieve logistical superiority in the great-power competition—particularly as the region faces increased militarization. Some observers have stated that China faces stiff competition from India and France in these six island nations in the Indo-Pacific.

For example, India aspires to emerge as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi seeks to counter China’s “string of pearls” through India’s own “string of flowers” strategy.¹⁸ One means of accomplishing this has been through the establishment of an Indian listening post in Madagascar. New Delhi understands the limitations imposed by constrained access to “resources and capacity to respond to a new security environment” for India.¹⁹ Thus, India has tried to decrease the gap through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Madagascar on defense cooperation, and Indian ships have participated in frequent goodwill port calls to Antsiranana, which could provide New Delhi with critical information about the ground reality—invaluable intelligence during a potential conflict and providing a competitive edge during peace times. Madagascar and India participate in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium—the former as an observer and the latter as a member—and both countries were part of the first Maritime India Summit²⁰ in 2016.²¹ These interactions are

essential in establishing India and Madagascar as critical stakeholders in the emerging “maritime security architecture” of the Indo-Pacific.²²

In 2021, the Malagasy and Indian navies conducted a passage exercise (PASSEX), reflecting growing defense ties and focusing on maritime security.²³ Relations have witnessed a revitalization since then—Indian president Ram Nath Kovind’s 2018 state visit to Madagascar, which underscored the need for New Delhi to engage with island countries. New Delhi and Antananarivo also have engaged in multidimensional areas such as defense and renewable energy, where the two countries are supporting each other in the International Solar Alliance.

Additionally, India has invested in a multilateral approach to gain traction in Madagascar through the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), on the periphery of the United Nations General Assembly which entails the offer a grant that would be utilized based on the recipient country’s choice. New Delhi has founded technology training centers in Madagascar, which plays to India’s strength. Moreover, India provided vital medical and food supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Indian companies have taken part in the surveying of oil and gas exploration blocks off Madagascar.²⁴

Another middle power, South Korea, has also been involved in the great-power competition in the region. Seoul has been involved in Madagascar and has invested in the Toliara Roads Rehabilitation Project and a national disaster management center to gain clout.²⁵ Furthermore, South Korea is interested in “food security and biofuel exports” from Madagascar. Daewoo’s Madagascar Future Enterprise Corporation has also signed a deal for a 99-year lease on 3.2 million acres, representing half of Madagascar’s arable territory and focusing on cultivating crops. Other investments include mineral investments in nickel as well. Some have expounded that these actions are part of Seoul’s efforts in an “aggressive game of catch up” in investing in the future of Madagascar.²⁶

It has been said that it is erroneous to assert that “Russia’s absence from the eastern Indian Ocean discounts its influence.”²⁷ Russia has signed a military cooperation agreement with Madagascar.²⁸ Strategic analysts have highlighted the fact that “Russia looks for military and energy supply contracts, mining concessions and infrastructure building deals” along with reducing the influence of other extra-regional powers operating in the region. Furthermore, Russia has been deeply involved in Madagascar’s presidential elections, and Kremlin acquaintances have been investing in mineral assets such as chromium mines in the country.

Other Russian investments include involvement in the highest-selling newspaper in the country, a viable asset for swaying Malagasy public opinion in Moscow’s favor.²⁹ With democracy backsliding in Madagascar, Russia provides Malagasy rulers with a pragmatic alternative partner that is not insistent on any requirements of democratization or any kind of accountability from the government.

On the other hand, France relies on relations established during its colonial rule in Madagascar and its continued training of the island’s armed forces as well as participation in regional organizations such as the Indian Ocean Commission.³⁰ France has provided Madagascar funds for its Initiative pour l’émergence de Madagascar (IEM).³¹ Likewise, the United States has been involved in scientific projects in the country, including the Deep Underground Neutrino Experiment (DUNE). Madagascar is the only African country involved in such as project. Tokyo provides incentives to Madagascar via the Japan International Cooperation Agency, a project of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.³² Japan is enthusiastic about its investment in Madagascar through the development of the Port of Toamasina, in which Tokyo invested 30 million Euros to further connectivity and foster development. The port’s capacity will increase to 1,000,000 from the current 250,000 containers per year.³³ This port development has generated goodwill, as the majority of Madagascar’s shipping

moves through the port. Additionally, Japan played an important role amid a food crisis in Madagascar in 2021, granting an emergency aid package that included food supplies and drinking water.

At the same time, Madagascar has been receptive to collaboration with various countries, and the current administration has come up with its “policy of integration and maritime cooperation.”³⁴

Future Challenges and Prospects Faced by Madagascar in the Region as Great-Power Competition Intensifies

Challenges

Political Instability. There have been fears pertaining to a new political crisis in Madagascar. President Andry Rajoelina, who initially came to power in a military coup, has utilized extraconstitutional means to retain power and consolidate control.³⁵ Observers have pointed out that “weak governance and inefficiency of political parties remain the key constraints to Madagascar’s development,” particularly under the current administration.³⁶ Furthermore, the president has tried to take advantage of the confluences of factors that influence great-power competition by working with Russia, which in the long run will harm Malagasy national interests.

Environmental Degradation. Among Madagascar’s national interests, climatic vulnerabilities abound. As the urgency of environmental problems snowballs in Madagascar, countries such as China have added to the degradation in the country through overharvesting of timber in the rosewood sector.³⁷ Environment-related concerns have become an Achilles heel for the country and have sprouted liabilities to be exploited by the great powers to justify their engagement in the country. This could oblige the government to be more selective in its association with other countries, particularly in certain traditional sectors.

Opportunities

Convergences on Sustainability. Madagascar has signed an agreement with the World Bank to reduce poverty, deforestation, and carbon emissions and an Emission Reductions Payment Agreement (ERPA) that would give USD 50 million to Madagascar to ease poverty among forest-dependent communities. Simultaneously, the deal would focus on lowering carbon emissions that are based on deforestation and forest degradation. Observers have pointed out that “sustainably finance its current policy of regreening the island and the restoration of forest landscapes, while rewarding local actors and the territories that contribute to restoration efforts.” This interaction could be the catalyst for similar agreements that could provide extra-regional powers a foothold in the country and, consequently, in the region.³⁸

Technology transfer- Madagascar can see better engagement with other powers while enhancing improve interoperability vis-à-vis knowledge sharing or even equipment transfers in emerging technologies in the realm of artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities that could be used to achieve various shared purposes such as Intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR). Other frameworks, such as Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF), could also “technical assistance on infrastructure development and sustainable infrastructure management.”³⁹

Indian Ocean Rim Association. Madagascar remains vulnerable to intense natural hazards, which compels the government to work with other countries and organizations, such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) that will provide the country with capabilities such as “disaster risk management, maritime safety, and the blue economy.” Additionally, IORA works to address issues emanating from expanding the “geopolitical, strategic and economic” importance of the region while offering funding for projects in the region. This is likely to increase the impact of IORA, which may emerge as a platform that can be pivotal for the great-power competition in the region.⁴⁰

Multilateral security. Multilateral security partnerships are a major priority for Madagascar. Having seen how India and the United States have worked in multilateral security partnership to boost ties between the two nations, Antananarivo is eager to develop similar relationships.⁴¹ Aside from the great power, middle powers such as France may embark on such endeavors to emerge as players in the great-power competition in the region.

Trilateral formats such as India–Australia–Japan and India–Australia–France could provide another path for Antananarivo to “build regional frameworks that exist outside great power competition.” Madagascar could work on these with India, and it is highly possible as a precedent has been set by these formats that in the future could encourage other trilateral based cooperation.⁴² On the other hand, the Quad Plus construct could provide a level playing field for African countries such as Madagascar to join partnerships, work toward national security, and provide robust assistance in managing natural resources to protect the ecosystem and promote sustainable living.

Aid. Madagascar has struggled to respond to natural disasters. The United States has been a major aid partner, and the EU has provided the nation with emergency humanitarian funding in 2022 that will bolster the “preparedness and logistics capacities at local level” and shows the bloc’s “solidarity towards this island nation,” including sending a team of experts to assess the situation.⁴³

Moreover, a prolonged drought in the southern part of the island has added yet another protracted crisis to a list of “multiple severe humanitarian crises” afflicting the country, including sandstorms, food shortages, and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁴ These events, in turn, have diminished any leverage Madagascar held in its relations with great powers in return for aid.

Conclusion

Political turmoil has long beset Madagascar, resulting in changes in the constitution and subsequent economic hardship, along with the army's interference in the political process. Various great powers have attempted bilateral rapprochement. For instance, China is "active and present in all economic sectors," including agriculture, fisheries, minerals, and energy. However, problems persist wherein "exports are concentrated around a few products, mainly raw materials; corruption is quasi-structural" despite the emerging importance of the country in maritime trade and growth. Antananarivo's "policy of integration and maritime cooperation" positions Madagascar as a conduit between the New Silk Road program and the African continent.⁴⁵ This has raised concerns that some infrastructures that are part of China's flagship program can be used for dual purposes—commercial and military. Great-power competition has been accentuating further the pursuit of lasting alignments through the use of soft power to create perceptions and persuade smaller countries through incentivizing projects and economic aid during natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes, which are becoming more frequent in the region.

Island states depend on great powers who are instrumental in establishing of "regional security hierarchies."⁴⁶ Such hierarchies are enforced as great powers cultivate cooperation and improve interoperability vis-à-vis knowledge sharing or equipment transfers in artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities. Other linkages have included building climate resilience through the Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility, which decreases infrastructure gaps, particularly as Madagascar remains "a prime example of the vulnerability of islands" to climate change.⁴⁷

Additionally, great powers are focused on addressing Madagascar's resource constraints to gain regional influence. Simultaneously, the strategic use of island nations has offered the emergent nontraditional actors a glimpse

of the immense promise of island nations that is likely to become a shared ambition with great powers to gain influence in the region.

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⁴ Ibid

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¹⁵ Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) is India's intention and attempt to enhance maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region.

Project Mausam has been intended to permit India to rebuild its linkages with its ancient trade partners and r "Indian Ocean world" along the littoral of the Indian Ocean.

Government of India's Press Information Bureau describes "the Sagarmala programme is the flagship programme of the Ministry of Shipping to promote port-led development in the country through harnessing India's 7,500 km long coastline, 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways and strategic location on key international maritime trade routes. The main vision of the Sagarmala Programme is to reduce logistics cost for EXIM and domestic trade with minimal infrastructure investment."

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¹⁹ Baruah, Darshana M. 2020. "India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity." *Carnegie*. June 30.

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Maritime India Summit is a flagship initiative of the Minister of State for Ports, Shipping & Waterways (I/C), Government of India that is composed of a 3-day Summit and Exhibition

that is attended by several important state and non-state actors involved in the maritime realm.

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