

# RAJA MANDALA: GREAT GAME IN AFRICA

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Defence minister [Rajnath Singh](#)'s visit to Mozambique this week is a good moment to reflect on the growing significance of the East African coast and the islands off it for the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

During his visit to Mozambique, Singh is expected to sign a number of agreements, including on hydrographic survey, sharing of white shipping information and the monitoring of its exclusive zone. He is also expected to deliver two fast patrol naval craft to the country as part of India's expanding security cooperation with Mozambique.

It's a pity that the defence minister's itinerary does not include two nearby island nations, Comoros and Madagascar. A visit to these two islands might have given the minister a better strategic appreciation of Mozambique and its maritime neighbourhood.

Mozambique, Madagascar and Comoros together constitute the Mozambique Channel, a critical waterway in the Indian Ocean, that has shaped the strategic evolution of the Indian Ocean over the centuries. It is worth recalling that Vasco da Gama, in his search for a sea route to India, sailed through the Mozambique Channel in 1498 after coming round the southern tip of Africa. Since then, the Mozambique Channel had been a major choke point in the sea lines of communication from Europe to India and further east.

The control of the Mozambique Channel and the Western Indian Ocean islands became a major element of the extended rivalry between the major powers. European rivalries ebbed after the Napoleonic Wars and the Indian Ocean became a British Lake. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 — which provided a shorter route from Europe to India — the salience of the South Western Indian Ocean began to diminish.

That might be changing as a number of factors draw international attention to the Mozambique Channel in the 21st century. The rise of China and East Asia as well as the slower emergence of India have deepened economic interdependence between Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The sea lines of communication between the east coast of Africa and the Far East have once again acquired some weight and importance.

As a rising China projects its naval power to the west of the Malacca Straits, competition with the established Indian Ocean powers like the US, UK, France and India has become inevitable. As old and new powers jockey for influence in the Indian Ocean littoral, every little island is becoming a contested terrain.

Access to critically located islands has always been an important part of the maritime jousting between great powers. In the Pacific, the contest is best understood as the competition to dominate the so-called island chains — as a springboard for either power projection or as a defensive line against potential naval aggression.

Both the American and Chinese strategic communities agree on the existence of three island chains running in concentric Pacific arcs around Asia. As great power rivalry returns to the Indian Ocean, the concept of island chains helps us understand the new regional dynamic. Three Indian Ocean island chains are coming into view.

One is the Andaman Island chain that bisects the Bay of Bengal. The Great Nicobar Island at the southern tip of the chain is well placed to dominate the western gates of the Malacca Straits that link the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A second chain runs from Gwadar in the northern Arabian sea along the Laccadives-Chagos ridge to Diego Garcia island that hosts a large American base.

A third island chain flows down from Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, down along the East African coast to the Mozambique channel through the island of Zanzibar. The islands in the South Western Indian Ocean, including Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles and Mauritius, can be seen as part of this chain.

Along all the three island chains, India is scrambling to cope with the rising Chinese naval profile. As the home minister in the previous government, Singh was in charge of the Andaman chain and presided over the initial steps to modernise the governance of the islands and augment Indian naval presence there. But China's deepening security ties with the littoral countries of the Bay of Bengal could begin to undermine India's geographic advantages arising from the ownership of the Andamans.

On the second island chain, Delhi warily watches China's expanding naval presence on Pakistan's Arabian sea coast and is battling to retain India's primacy in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Meanwhile, US naval presence in Chagos is coming under stress as sovereignty over the archipelago has become the subject of an international dispute.

Once dominated by the European powers, the third island chain running along the east coast of Africa to the South Western Indian Ocean has seen the dramatic expansion of Chinese economic and strategic influence over the last decade. Besides the establishment of its first military base, China has an ambitious agenda of port construction, infrastructure development, and defence diplomacy.

During its first term, the [Narendra Modi](#) government had done much to put Africa and the third Indian Ocean island chain on Delhi's mental map. This included decisions to enhance the diplomatic presence in Africa, initiate sustained high-level political contact and beef up security partnerships in the littoral of the South Western Indian Ocean.

But the scale of the challenge confronting India in the three island chains continues to expand, amidst China's rapid strategic advance in the Indian Ocean.

Singh's visit to Mozambique offers an opportunity for Delhi to review the progress made in

implementing the Indian Ocean Strategy that PM Modi announced during his visit to some of the island nations in 2015. Such a review should also help reveal at least a few of the big obstacles — especially the internal ones — that continue to limit Delhi's possibilities with the three Indian Ocean island chains.

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