

RAJA MANDALA: VANILLA IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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As Vice-President [Venkaiah Naidu](#) heads to the Comoros and other destinations in Africa this week, Delhi might want to add another geography for its diplomatic lexicon — the Vanilla Islands. As India devotes greater attention to the Indian Ocean, many places that have long fallen off Delhi's political radar are coming into view. The Comoros and the Vanilla Islands, as a collective, are bound to draw ever more interest from Delhi in the years ahead.

A group of exotic island states in the South Western Indian Ocean — The Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Reunion, Seychelles — joined hands a few years ago to promote tourism to their corner in the Indian Ocean. That many of them grow vanilla — which gives us the popular ice cream flavour — was a good enough reason for calling themselves after it.

Naidu, of course, will have a lot more than vanilla on his mind. As the first senior figure from the Indian leadership to visit the Comoros, Naidu would receive a warm welcome in the island nation. Comoros has been more than eager to step up its engagement with India. Delhi is finally showing up; and there is much to do.

As part of the growing interaction with the island states, Modi met leaders of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) on the margins of the UNGA last month. Together they account for more than 40 members. Their large numbers and impact on the voting patterns in the UN and other multilateral forums had always made island states of interest to major powers. Today, a number of other factors lend them additional significance.

Immediate vulnerability to rising sea levels has made island states the most active champions of urgent global action to mitigate climate change. Island states have also taken the lead in developing the concept of "blue economy" focused on sustainable use and development of ocean resources. Modi's activism on countering climate change and promoting blue economy have made the island states special partners for India.

Many of the island states are also beginning to see themselves as more than specks of land in the vast blue sea. Some of them are calling themselves large "Ocean States". Rightly so. Thanks to the provisions of the Law of the Sea, the ocean states are entitled to large exclusive economic zones (EEZ). One of the Vanilla Islands, Seychelles for example, has a land area of approximately 455 sq km spread over 115 islands and a population of barely 100,000. But its EEZ is close to 1.3 million sq km.

Naidu would want to build on the multiple lines of connection with the Comoros. The island nation is a founding member of the International Solar Alliance launched by Modi in 2018. It is a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association that Delhi has sought to revive in recent years. The Comoros is also a member of the Arab League that India always had strong ties with and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that India has begun to reach out in recent years. As Delhi appreciates the renewed geopolitical significance of the Comoros, along with the other

Vanilla Islands, the vice-president is expected to lay the foundation for sustained strategic cooperation with the Comoros.

In the colonial era, the Vanilla Islands were very much the object of rivalry among the European powers. With all the sea lines of communication between Europe and the Indian Ocean came round Africa and went through the Mozambique channel, the Vanilla islands became attractive way stations.

The Comoros was of special importance as it sits at the northern end of the Mozambique channel and provided a strong base from which to control the channel. France gained the upper hand among the European powers in the Vanilla Islands in the 18th century. The construction of the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean and the Red Sea in the mid 19th century obviated the need for European shipping to go round Africa. This, in turn, reduced the strategic significance of the Vanilla islands.

As African resources become important for Asian powers like China, Japan and India, the SLOCS from Africa's east coast and the Vanilla islands that straddle them have once again become important. As they appreciate their renewed salience, the islands are looking to develop partnerships with the major powers. As elsewhere in the region, India can contribute significantly to the security and prosperity of the Comoros.

Although India has had strong ties with one of the Vanilla Islands, Mauritius, Delhi has long seen it through the prism of the Indian diaspora. It is only recently that Delhi has begun to pay attention to the strategic dimensions of the relationship with Mauritius. During PM Modi's first term, the Foreign Office set up a separate Indian Ocean Division with a focus on the island states. It clubbed Maldives and Sri Lanka with Mauritius and Seychelles, but left out the other Vanilla Islands.

To be effective in the south western Indian Ocean, however, Delhi must begin to treat the Vanilla Islands as a single strategic space. It can build on its traditional presence in Mauritius to launch substantive economic and defence cooperation with the littoral. Naidu's visit to Comoros this week and President Ramnath Kovind's travel to Madagascar last year are first steps in what could be an exciting Indian journey to the Vanilla Islands.

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