

Maritime Security Cooperation in Indian Ocean: Prospects and Way Ahead for IORA

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean is home to one fifth of the world's water bodies and is rich in a range of biological and mineral resources. It is one of the busiest maritime routes in the entire planet. Therefore, it is essential to protect the ecosystem and the natural resources of this ocean. The Indian Ocean has historically been a region of great collaboration, but on the other hand, it has been also blighted by mistrust. Despite the Indian Ocean Region being a significant and heavily used ocean space on which most of the global trade depends, there is insufficient cooperation between the littoral states to ensure the waterbody is safe. This paper examines the necessity of maritime security cooperation in Indian ocean for the betterment of the whole region. In fact, there are numerous ways to cooperate on maritime security in the Indian Ocean, including by utilizing shared resources, capabilities and expertise. The Indian Ocean's users and the littoral states can both be harmed by non-traditional security risks, which can be eliminated with mutual cooperation. Specifically Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the only pan-Indian ocean organization has significant roles to play in eliminating the security risks and bringing the countries of the Indian ocean and other extra-regional players closer for effective collaboration in future.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, Indo-Pacific, Regional Cooperation, piracy, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), BIMSTEC.

1. Introduction

The ocean has been a source of wealth for millennia linking economics around the world. International shipping and ports provide crucial linkages in global supply chains. The vast maritime-littoral space of the Indian Ocean is of immense geo-political, geo-economic and geo-strategic significance where economics and security have always influenced the historical and contemporary discourse in the region. Today the global geopolitical focus has squarely set its gaze on this so-called Great Connector- the IOR that is likely to shape the regional and global events on a larger canvas.

With increased levels of shipping and trade through the IOR, there is a corresponding increase in associated maritime crimes and other challenges at sea. However, guided by

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the quest for security and economic development, a positive trend is fast emerging in international geopolitics about partnership and close maritime cooperation. But there are several social, religious, cultural and ideological fault lines that give rise to conflicting strategic interests, competing economies, social instability, demographic stresses and power struggle between regional and extra regional actors. Hence maritime governance today demands flexible and multi-pronged response strategies.

The regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean thus needs to be charted and navigated carefully, considering the regional architecture, especially the security dynamics. A respectable number of regional forums and organizations have been formed in the recent past by the Indian Ocean states, but most of these forums have not lived up to the expectations. The single biggest regional forum is IORA which was initiated in 1997 as IOR-ARC (Wagner, 2013). With the present 23 members and 10 dialogue partners IORA has had a sustained growth but there are issues and challenges that has so far hampered its expected effectiveness in terms of maritime security cooperation.



Figure 1: Indian Ocean (Source: <http://www.yourchildlearns.com/online-atlas/indian-ocean-map.htm>)

2. Choke Points and Strategic Petroleum Streams

However, to understand the security dynamics of the Indian Ocean, it is important to understand little better about the IOR Choke Points and strategic oil routes. Oil is seen as an essential strategic commodity which needs to be protected all the time. The strategic petroleum streams are the conduits and connectors between the sites and nodes of the oil and gas export activity, strategic refining hubs, waypoints and the consumer markets. On the other hand, the 5 important Choke Points can literally choke the IOR littorals economy if not protected well.

3. Emerging Indo-Pacific: Two Oceans One Region

In view of the US continued strategic interest in the IOR, there is today a major 'Indian Ocean Vector' in the previously conceptualized 'US Strategic Rebalance' which vindicates the 'Indo-Pacific' school of thought (Bisley and Phillips, 2013). So, this emerging Indo Pacific- two oceans but one region is increasingly linked by shipping and strategy with intertwined trade and economy, with the maritime security scenario of both the oceans often overflow into each other.

4. Bay of Bengal as Fulcrum of IOR Security

The maritime security matrix of the Indian Ocean is largely influenced by the cumulative security scenario of different regions and sub-regions of the IOR. For example, the Bay of Bengal region has historically played a pivotal role as a maritime highway to the greater Indian Ocean - where trade, commerce and cultures were intertwined for centuries. Today, due to geo-strategic and geo-economic factors, the Bay emerges as a fulcrum of a wider Indo-Pacific region because of its vicinity to the maritime trading routes overlooking the Malacca Strait. The Bay also remains a route for piracy, narcotics, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and illegal fishing.

5. Maritime Security Landscape in IOR

Apart from conventional threats from state actors, today's maritime security challenges refer to a wide spectrum of low intensity maritime crimes or conflicts, mostly emanated from the non-state actors. Such maritime threats and challenges are normally transnational in nature and do not recognize national boundary.

a. **Piracy and Armed Robbery.** The piracy in the Indian Ocean region has seriously degraded the maritime trade in IOR in the past. Their root cause basically lies in the social instability, poverty, poor governance, corruption, internal power struggle, fund

generation through ransom, etc. Earlier the major piracy incidents reported in the Indian Ocean were prevalent in the Malacca Straits and the Horn of Africa. However, coordinated anti-piracy patrols along with multilateral initiatives like ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Asia Pacific) lead to temporary reduction in the number of incidents after 2004 (Ho, 2009). On the other hand, due to adoption of Best Management Practices and good works of the Combined Task Forces, multi-national naval coalitions and specially CTF 151 has decreased the piracy incidents almost to nil since 2014 (Terry, 2009).

b. Maritime Terrorism and Asymmetric Threats. Today, world shipping is facing newer challenges like maritime terrorism and asymmetric threats and a dramatic illustration was seen in October 2002, when the French super tanker Limburg was rammed by an explosive laden dingy off the coast of Yemen. The attack on USS Cole in Aden in 2000 has shown that even highly sophisticated warships can be threatened by low-tech attacks (Langworthy et al., 2004).

c. Pirate-Terror Nexus. A great cause of concern that the world shipping may face is the unholy nexus between the pirates and the terror groups.

d. IUU Fishing. ‘Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU)’ fishing incidents are common in IOR especially in all disputed and unregulated waters causing huge loss to the national exchequer.

e. Marine Pollution. Land based or shipborne Pollution causes ecological and environmental disasters. In spite of various MARPOL Conventions, Anti Ballast Water Convention and Anti Fowling Paints Convention, the menace of pollution could not be eradicated that hampers the marine biodiversity and ecological integrity of our oceans.

f. Human Trafficking. The political instability, economic disparity, lack of employment opportunity, etc. cause people to cross the nation’s boundary specially through the porous sea routes. For example, illegal immigration efforts in recent years by fortune seekers of the Rohingya from Myanmar towards Thailand and Malaysia have been a cause of great concern.

g. Natural Disasters and Marine Accidents. An important category of challenges in maritime environment of IOR is presented by nature itself. The IOR is the locus of almost 70% of world’s natural disasters demonstrated in cyclones that regularly hit the Bay of Bengal littorals (Balaguru et al., 2014). IOR is also a Tsunami prone region. More so, there are significant numbers of marine accidents taking place in IOR like the case of MH 370. Moreover, major shipping accidents like X-Press Pearl and MT New Diamond near Sri Lanka’s coast and bulk Carrier Wakashio off Mauritius Coast have caused irreparable oil pollution havoc in recent years.

Challenges to Effective Collaboration

6. Influence of Geo-strategy.

The presence of global hub of oil and gas, spillover effect of South China Sea, tensions related to OBOR, and Maritime Silk Route and other geo- strategic reasons may lead to continued great power rivalry in IOR. Reflecting on the reality of the situation Robert Kaplan describes in his book 'Monsoon' the US position in the region as one "where the rivalry between the United States and China interlocks with the regional rivalry between China and India." It therefore transpires that the stakes and interests of major powers from within and outside the region may crossroads in IOR which may be inimical to IOR security. However, India has long sought to become a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. To achieve this objective, the country has taken several maritime initiatives such as 'Quad' and 'SAGAR', both of which could strengthen the country's geopolitical objective. However, how the country maintains its balancing act in the midst of Ukraine-Russia conflict may affect the geopolitical matrix of Indian ocean (Ullah and Hayat, 2014).

7. Diversity and Disparity in Maritime Forces

The Indian Ocean region is unique not just on account of its centrality to trade and energy flows but also because of stark diversity and contrasts in the littoral countries' politics, culture, ethnicity, language, economics and environment. As regards the law enforcement capability at sea, the contrast and disparity are even more prominent. Because of this, there has not been any meaningful holistic approach by the maritime forces of IOR in addressing transnational maritime threats.

8. Lack of Information Sharing

Insufficient data and lack of information sharing at regional level due to over-sensitivity issue often results in poor situational awareness in IOR.

9. Lack of Trust and Cooperation

Absence of mutual trust is one of the considerable obstacles to be overcome. The lack of adequate confidence building measures have prevented the creation of an overarching security architecture for the entire region.

10. Bilateral Issues and Disputes

There are still some key bilateral issues among the IOR nations. In BIMSTEC, while Bangladesh and India have amicably resolved the maritime boundary delimitation, the Rohingya issue unless resolved, may dampen and delay the otherwise enthusiastic mood of the Bay of Bengal littorals for effective maritime security cooperation.

Existing Regional Cooperation Mechanism

11. Lack of Effective Regional Forums

On a sub-regional level, SAARC is currently dormant amidst sharp political differences among their members. However, cooperation exists individually among the GCC, SADC, IOC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, etc. but these have limited roles, mandates, and effectiveness at larger forum across the IOR.

12. Relevance of IORA for Maritime Security

The IORA is the only Ministerial level forum for cooperation in the entire IOR. IORA was originally formed upon the values of **open regionalism** for boosting economic cooperation especially on the realms of trade facilitation, investment, the region's social development and promotion. IORA assigned Maritime safety and security in 2011 as the top priority area of focus. The IORA Leaders' Summit held in March 2017, in Jakarta, Indonesia, highlighted the prioritization of these concerns through its theme, "Strengthening Maritime Cooperation for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indian Ocean" (IORA, 2017).

In August 2019, Sri Lanka hosted the First Meeting of the IORA Maritime Safety and Security Working Group, which finalized the regional Work Plan drawn up for a period of two years (2019 – 2021) (IORA, 2019). The Second IORA Meeting of Experts on MSS held in November 2017 in India, provided an outcome document entitled "Blueprint for Maritime Safety and Security in IORA" (IORA, 2018). IORA has also devised flagship initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Dialogue, which is held annually as a track 1.5 event, bringing together key representatives including scholars, experts, analysts, and policy makers from think tanks, civil societies and governments from IORA Member States to discuss pertinent issues including MSS. Apparently IORA has made some useful course corrections in the last decade in order to address the maritime security challenges and formulate regional policy.

13. Functional Limitations of IORA

However, IORA has delivered only mixed results due to various limitations and did struggle to identify common ground and a shared vision. IORA itself is its own worst enemy since IORA is a consensus-based organization, which allows any state to block a decision not to its liking, and de facto paralyzing the Association. Finally, the extra-regional powers will continue to have a strong interest in the region somewhat legally, because in 2018, IORA adopted the ‘Declaration on Guidelines for Enhancing Interaction with Dialogue Partners’ which acknowledges the contribution of dialogue partners and their commitment in assisting IORA in creating a stable and prosperous Indian Ocean region, as underlined in the Jakarta Concord (IORA, 2018). Interestingly, the inherent theme of this declaration on Guidelines for Dialogue partners is opposite to the concept of ‘Indian Ocean-Zone of Peace’ proposed by Sri Lanka five decades back.

14. Contribution of IONS

The primary aim of IONS is to attain “mutually beneficial maritime security outcomes within the Indian Ocean” through the promotion of a shared understanding of maritime issues and the formulation of a common set of strategies designed to enhance regional maritime security; to strengthen capacity building; to promote trans-national maritime cooperative-mechanisms; and to develop interoperability in terms of doctrines and procedures for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) (Ghosh, 2012). Navy is a country’s instrument of foreign policy which can be used for benign tasks in foreign waters like goodwill visits and exercises in addition to its traditional roles. IONS must also recognize the risk of interstate tensions in the IOR and contribute its share to confidence-building measures.

15. Functional Gaps between IORA and IONS

There exist some functional grey areas when we try to operationalize both IORA and IONS at tandem. There are several countries which are Members of both IORA and IONS. But key Members of the IONS such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Myanmar are not Members of the IORA; and Members of the IORA such as the Comoros and Somalia are not Members of the IONS. Significantly, the UK and France are Members of the IONS but dialogue partners of the IORA; China and Japan are observer countries in the IONS and dialogue partners in the IORA. The US is a dialogue partner of the IORA only but not a member of IONS in any capacity. As such dealing IONS and IORA in an integrated manner for encountering the security challenges might cause some discontinuity.

16. MECHANISMS FOR COOPERATION IN IORA: WAY AHEAD

The distinct nature of the geostrategic environment must be at the core of any cooperative-security considerations. The Indian Ocean is too big, too diverse, and too important and the challenges too large to be dominated or “owned” by any single nation or small group. They need, therefore, to be constructively engaged following some tailor-made version of regional cooperation, if necessary.

17. ARF and CSCAP-A Model for Indo-Pacific Cooperative architecture

The ASEAN Regional Forum or ARF is an important platform for security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific. It provides a setting in which members can discuss current security issues and develop cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region. The ARF is managed by the member states and the platform generally avoids discussing sensitive security issues. Instead, the platform generally focusses on non-traditional security aspects where it is easier to build consensus (Haacke, 2009).

Similarly, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is a “Track 2” entity that performs a very useful function in enabling sensitive and controversial issues to be informally discussed by experienced former diplomats, officials, and academics, generating proposals that can be put forward to official forums and regional governments for consideration. This platform too uses informal mechanism integrating state and non-state actors to raise security awareness among member states.

Therefore, both ARF and CSCAP could be seen as a model for an Indo-Pacific cooperative architecture. IORA can borrow this framework of non-interfering cooperation to organize its institutional structure. While IONS is likely to facilitate relatively mainly navy-to-navy cooperation. IORA with its Track 1 or Track 2 initiative like ARF or CSCAP should formulate IOR comprehensive maritime security policy, IONS should be its enforcement tools.

18. Strengthen Sub-Regional Maritime Security

BIMSTEC has displayed some proactive initiatives in the recent years to bolster regional security, which can be replicated in other regional forums for comprehensive security in IOR. In the recent years, Annual Meeting of BIMSTEC national security chiefs on information and intelligence sharing to discuss security issues pertaining to the region of the Bay of Bengal is being held. It was also discussed during the previous

BIMSTEC meetings to consider a single, unified regional security umbrella for BIMSTEC to address non-traditional security threats in the Bay of Bengal.

19. IORA to Engage Mini-lateral Groupings.

Over the decades, the ability of the various multilateral forums to take collective action has been hobbled by institutional inertia, vested interests, and challenges to decision-making. Mini laterals are thus being seen as an alternative route to form partnerships and smaller coalitions to resolve issues of regional and global concern. In early March 2022, the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), a grouping of India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Mauritius, adopted a road map for cooperation and collaboration in areas such as maritime security, counterterrorism, and drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean (Subhadeep, 2022). IORA can make constructive engagements with mini-lateral groupings and encourage such initiatives in other sub-regions for maritime security.

20. A Holistic Multi Layered Approach

We need to adopt a holistic and multi-layered approach with comprehensive multinational coordinated efforts that involve political, military and societal measures, strengthens regional security capabilities and brings about more effective law enforcement measures. Much can be gained from a cooperative regional approach between states that promotes consultation not confrontation, reassurance not deterrence, transparency not secrecy and inclusiveness not unilateralism.

21. Collaborative Capacity Building and Interoperability

Particular attention may be given to collaborative capacity building and interoperability in the fields of information exchange, surveillance, maritime law enforcement, and interoperability in terms of common doctrine, SOP and unity of efforts.

22. Maritime Domain Awareness and Information Sharing

Neither any single agency sees the full national picture, nor a single navy gets the full trans-boundary picture. The IOR maritime nations need to collaborate in establishing a shared common sea situation picture for maritime domain awareness which should be dynamic and real time. In this spirit, Singapore navy set up the Information Fusion Centre in 2009, to information sharing on white shipping and other maritime security issues. However, every region and sub-region in IOR needs to effectively maintain such fusion centres and create an overlapping and interlocking situational awareness picture. The task may be executed by several regional Maritime Coordination Centres in IOR.

23. Trust and Confidence Building Measures

We need to come out of the legacies of mistrust and lack of confidence that have hitherto prevented meaningful engagement. Various confidence building measures like goodwill visits, combined naval exercises, HADR missions will greatly facilitate this cause. Bangladesh navy and Indian navy carry out CORPAT along the maritime boundary (Sengupta, 2018). On the other hand, BN has extended HADR support to countries like Maldives, Srilanka, Philippines and even to Malaysia during MH 370 search mission.

24. Regional Maritime Trade Security Structure

IONS can act as the prime executive body for trade security while there has to be some ministerial level forum under IORA to discuss broader maritime security issues. Moreover, for operational coordination on trade security, we may form several CTFs under the aegis of existing sub-regional bodies (SAARC, ASEAN, GCC etc) for joint patrol and monitoring.

25. From Strategic Competition to Accommodation

Given the huge strategic and economic interests involving the major regional and extra-regional players, their engagements and active presence cannot be denied or contested. But while identifying common interests for multilateral engagement, IORA should afford to veer the Great Power dynamics from strategic competition to accommodation. Such cooperation, however, is contingent on building trust, or at the very least reducing mistrust. We should not lose sight of the fact that 'Freedom of Navigation' is universally applicable to everyone and to all the seas of the world as per UNCLOS III.

26. IOR Comprehensive Maritime Policy

Indian Ocean nation-states must articulate a comprehensive IOR maritime security policy incorporating UNCLOS III, SUA Convention, Port State and Flag State Control and other IMO Conventions.

27. Conclusion

It is pertinent to emphasize that maritime trade and security is our regional concern, and we must work together to build up a common security structure of our own choice. Today, a comprehensive multilateral approach on maritime security is required for the convergence of interests for greater benefit of the Indian Ocean Region.

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