

The Indian Ocean and its Littorals

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About NatStrat

NatStrat is an independent, not-for-profit centre for research on strategic and security issues.

Vision

The 21st century is upon us. The post-World War II global architecture is becoming unsustainable. The international security and strategic environment is changing. The centre of gravity of global influence is shifting, and new powers are emerging. India is one of them. Despite the odds, India has withstood internal and external challenges to preserve its democratic and constitutional ethos. Its diversity and pluralism have grown while being firmly rooted in its civilisational heritage. As a result, the states of India are more empowered today than before. More than half its population, larger than the combined size of Europe and the US, is under the age of thirty.

The transformation underway in India will unleash powerful impulses beyond India's borders. This will profoundly impact the world's political, social, cultural and economic systems. As India rises and finds its rightful place on the world stage, its unique identity, traditions and value systems will become critical to global peace and stability.

India is looking ahead to mark the centenary year of its post-independence existence. How India thinks will matter. How India acts will matter even more.

The success of India is crucial to humankind. We seek to understand the domestic and external security challenges facing India and what drives India's strategic calculations. We will ask the right questions without fear or favour and provide our views and insights fearlessly. We will bring an authentic Indian perspective to understanding the world. We aim to make India's voice heard and count in the international community.

NatStrat undertakes research on issues that impact India's security and foreign policy interests with a focus on three areas – geopolitics, national security, technology, and economy. NatStrat's research is objective, impartial and rigorous. It upholds the highest standards of excellence and scrutiny. NatStrat seeks to reach out to decision-makers, policymakers, practitioners and the strategic community within and outside India. It engages with international counterparts and with institutions and scholars across India. NatStrat produces a variety of material, including research papers, commentaries, monographs and policy briefs. Its contributors are among the most authoritative and experienced professionals with international repute and acclaim. It also promotes new and fresh perspectives by encouraging young thinkers to write and work for it. As part of its activities, NatStrat hosts seminars, round-table discussions, lectures, podcasts and interviews.

Foreword

The Indian Ocean is an indispensable part of India's strategic calculations. No analysis of India's security scenario can be complete without understanding how India views the Indian Ocean Region.

The vision for this was articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his famous speech in Mauritius in March 2015 in which he unveiled the concept of SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region with reference to the Indian Ocean Region. He had noted that the “Indian Ocean Region hosts over 40 states and nearly 40% of the world's population. It touches Australia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and the eastern seaboard of Africa. It sparkles with the gems of island states” and that “India has been shaped in more ways by the seas around us”. “Today, 90% of our trade by volume and 90% of our oil imports take place through sea. We have [a] coastline of 7500 km, 1200 islands and 2.4 million square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone”... “So, the Indian Ocean Region is at the top of our policy priorities”.

The Indian Ocean is poised to become increasingly important for India in the years ahead. It is a region whose history is rich with lessons and whose future will shape the destiny of its inhabitants.

This edition of NatStrat's special publication brings together a compilation of exclusive views from Indian and international scholars who have knowledge of and a stake in the Indian Ocean. The publication by no means does justice to the vastness of the subject, but is symbolic of its salience in India's strategic calculations.

It is no coincidence that the publication begins with a Special Feature by His Excellency Maneesh Gobin, the Foreign Minister of Mauritius. We are grateful to him as well as to each of the other contributors for their generous time and views.

Pankaj Saran
Convenor, NatStrat

Abstract

One of the most consequential evolutions in Indian security and strategic thinking in the contemporary era has been the system-wide focus on the maritime domain as against the continental domain. The Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are at the heart of this evolution. This comprises a huge EEZ and Continental Shelf, in which are located 1300 of India's islands.

The Indian Ocean may not be India's Ocean but it is India's primary area of interest. India has responsibilities to discharge, contributions to make and interests to protect in the Indian Ocean. India has taken many actions, both on the ground as well in doctrine, to catch up for lost time as well as to meet future threats in the Indian Ocean Region.

The Indian Ocean's all-encompassing nature cuts across multiple sectors. Today, all sections of the Indian state are focussed on developing the capability to harness its resources for national as well as global good. It is the lifeline that serves the needs of India. It is also a transit route that serves global trade and commerce.

The lesson from history is that the Indian Ocean is a living bridge between civilisations that connects India to faraway lands and cultures, from the West to the East. Lying at its centre, the Indian peninsula is blessed with geographical advantage as well as a composite culture which has links with almost all the littoral States. A network of mechanisms has been built to foster a sense of community and promote peace and cooperation as well as to respond to traditional and non-traditional threats.

Given its salience, NatStrat invited experts from India and other countries to share their perspectives on the Indian Ocean Region. The result is an exclusive collection of essays containing diverse views on the Indian Ocean Region, the threats faced, and the potentialities for cooperation within it.

The collection begins with a **Special Feature by His Excellency Mr. Maneesh Gobin, Foreign Minister of Mauritius** titled **“Maritime Security Architecture in the Indian Ocean: Challenges in the Western Indian Ocean Region”**, which advocates implementation of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) as a common denominator through shared experience. Shared experience requires strategic-level dialogue while simultaneously building on past experiences from around the world.

The first section is titled “India in the Indian Ocean”.

In his article, **“Continental and Maritime India: Linkages & Conundrums”**, **Rear Admiral Sudarshan Y Shrikhande, an Indian Navy Veteran**, unpacks the continental-maritime spectrum within the statecraft framework of Diplomacy, Intelligence, Military and Economic.

In the third article, **“India's Maritime Security Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region”**, **Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar (Retd)** from the **United Services Institute**, elaborates on the Indian Navy's maritime security strategy aimed at strengthening three key pillars: the promotion of stability, the maintenance of security and the preservation of peace.

The fourth article is on **“The Role of India's Merchant Navy in Maritime Governance”**, by **Kuljinder K. (Jeena) Cheema, a United States Navy Cryptologic Veteran**. She navigates the role of India's Merchant Navy to enhance maritime safety and security by providing skills training, research, coordination of capacity-building initiatives, the development of best practices and fostering regional cooperation.

In his article, **“The Indian and Chinese Navies against the Houthis: A Case Study”** **Siddhant Hira** from **NatStrat** contrasts the relative inaction of the Chinese Navy against the

Houthis in the Western Indian Ocean with a far more active Indian Navy deployment, as a case study of their respective responses.

The second section is titled “Bilateral Perspectives”.

In his article **“Indonesia-India Relations: Challenges and Opportunities”**, **Dr. Yohanes Sulaiman**, at **Universitas Jenderal Achmad Yani, Cimahi, Indonesia**, writes on how the Indonesia-India relationship is at a crossroads, with both challenges and opportunities ahead. By leveraging their complementary strengths and addressing common challenges, both countries can enhance their bilateral cooperation.

The seventh article on **“Japan-India: Maritime, Space and Economic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”** by **Tsuneo “Nabe” Watanabe** from the **Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo** explains how Japan and India are strengthening their partnership with the United States in an effort to jointly create public goods for regional stability and prosperity.

In the eighth article, **“Russia in the Indian Ocean Region: From Power Projection to Classical ‘Mahanism’”** **Alexey Kupriyanov** from **IMEMO, Russia** brings out the growing and belated interest of Russia in the Indian Ocean, starting with Russia’s presence in the Red Sea and prospects for deeper cooperation with India, including in the fight against piracy.

In the ninth article, **“From Strategy to Security – Seychelles and India in the Indian Ocean Region”**, **Diana Benoit** from the **University of Seychelles** highlights the strategic importance of Seychelles in the Western Indian Ocean where significant maritime communication routes pass through and lists specific areas where Seychelles can benefit from cooperation with India as a major maritime power.

In her article **“Maritime Contestation in the Indian Ocean”**, **Dr. Amaia Sanchez-Cacicedo** at the **EU Institute for Security Studies** argues why, in light of China’s penetration of the Indian Ocean, it is imperative

for the EU to work with India in the Indian Ocean.

The third section is titled “Regional Cooperation”.

In his article on **“The Umbilical Cord connecting India and Sri Lanka”** **Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke** from the **Pathfinder Foundation, Sri Lanka** highlights connectivity arrangements between India and Sri Lanka, including land connectivity aimed to develop access to the Sri Lankan ports of Trincomalee and Colombo, as examples of regional cooperation in the IOR.

In the article **“Strategic Importance of the Bay Of Bengal in the Indian Ocean”**, **Tariq Karim** of the **Independent University, Bangladesh** argues for developing a vibrant Bay of Bengal community in the context of Admiral Mahan’s vision of the importance of oceans for nations as far back as the 19th century.

Dr. Frederic Grare, of the European Council on Foreign Relations, in his article **“Enhancing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indian Ocean”**, argues why it is essential to have a coordination mechanism for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indian Ocean Region, possibly led by India, Australia and France.

Keywords: *Indian Ocean Region, Indian Ocean, HADR, Maritime Security, Indian Navy, SAGAR, Bay of Bengal, Trincomalee, BIMSTEC, IORA, IONS, East African coast, Piracy, Red Sea, Quad, East Africa, Indo-pacific*

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Special Feature

MARITIME SECURITY IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN REGION: A PERSPECTIVE FROM MAURITIUS

His Excellency Mr. Maneesh Gobin, Foreign Minister, Mauritius



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth of Mauritius, December 2019. | pmindia.gov.in/

Introduction

In continuation with trends observed over centuries, the vast resources of the Indian Ocean Region continue to shape the livelihoods and destinies of peoples, from coastal to distant States.

Since long, analysts have emphasized the crucial role of maritime power in shaping geopolitical influence and global dominance. It is obvious that the Indian Ocean, being the world's third largest ocean, is of vital importance to the world, all the more so as it is a major theater for the

movement of oil and goods. The fact that around 80 percent of the world's maritime oil and one third of the world's bulk cargo traffic pass annually through its confines, confers a strategic importance to the region.

Besides, considering that the Indian Ocean is also home to 2.9 billion people living in 33 different countries adds a complex political dimension to the maritime space and to the interaction of international players. Beyond this broad outline, it has also been argued that controlling sea routes, ensuring the sea lines of communication (SLOCs), the possession of a powerful fleet and reliance on naval bases are crucial in exerting

dominance over the oceans.

While these factors may fit in the contours of the rivalries between the great powers, I wish to highlight the perspective of Mauritius, a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) which, while situated at the heart of the Indian Ocean, possesses none of those attributes, relying only on a collective approach to enhance the maritime security within its borders.

For Mauritius, issues relating to sovereignty, control of the Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ), the development of Blue Economy, the depletion of fish stocks caused by Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, climate change and the rise of sea level and drug trafficking have and continue to remain high on its maritime security agenda.

It goes without saying that the task ahead of Mauritius in the domain of maritime security, endowed with an EEZ of 2.3 million square kilometres is very challenging, adding to the complexity of the situation. Yet, despite our limited means, our aspirations are to draw from the past to have a footprint, albeit collectively, in the future contours of the Western Indian Ocean.

Charting a Course for Our Economic Development

Mauritius, like all countries and particularly SIDS has nurtured its bilateral relations bearing in mind its economic interests. In our case, these interests were intricately linked to the export of sugar, clothing and semi-industrial goods mostly to Europe and the United States, in exchange for the import of food and raw materials from Asia and Europe. Since its independence in 1968, Mauritius has leveraged its special ties with regional partners, especially India and France, given the strong centuries-old people-to-people links.

As an influential player in the former Common Market, France used its leverage to facilitate the access of the bulk of Mauritius sugar to the European market, at a guaranteed price under the Sugar Protocol. The earnings from sugar would be invested in the nascent tourism and manufacturing industries. France and India would also extend capacity building, technical and financial assistance, and cooperation to Mauritius in all sectors including in maritime security.

In those times, Mauritius, having no operational deployment capabilities of its own, received assurances from France and India over its national security in case of any external threats, at a time when political coups had reached the shores of the Indian Ocean.

Having ensured its security at no costs, Mauritius pursued its development agenda catering for the welfare of its citizens through free education, free health services and employment for all. Given our understanding of the correlation between poverty and instability, this dual approach based on security assurances and access to markets for our exports drove the development of the country.

This development strategy was imperative to prove wrong the findings of international reports predicting that Mauritius, as an independent country, was doomed to fail as it ticked all the negative indicators, namely the smallness of the country, a sugar-based monocrop economy representing 90% of foreign earnings, a per capita Gross Domestic Product of less than US \$200, an unemployment rate exceeding 20%, rampant overpopulation and the country's inherent remoteness from major markets and its multi-ethnic society.

While these hurdles were overtaken with time, political stability, democratic governance and elections at regular intervals fuelled the development model of Mauritius. It is gratifying to observe that after 50 years of independence, at the close of 2019, Mauritius was classified as a High-Income Country by the World Bank with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of US

\$12,740.

This milestone achievement was short-lived as the pandemic that struck the country in February 2020 and throughout 2021, led to the closure of international borders causing the downturn of the economy including of the tourism industry. These unfortunate circumstances would reverse the progress of the GNI, scaling back the classification.

Today, the compounded effects of the war in Eastern Europe continue to impact the economic situation of the country with the rise in prices of commodities and energy, mounting inflation and increasing freight costs. Moreover, the disruptions caused by the resurgence of acts of piracy in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean since November 2023 have thrown a veil of uncertainty not only over the economic situation but also on the stability of the region.

In these circumstances, Mauritius is compelled to draw from lessons of its past. Indeed, in the early days, ensuring maritime security and promoting development were intricately linked, each being dependent on the other for the success of the country. Today, the volatile geopolitical environment is compelling us once again to have a two-pronged strategy, centered on economic development and ensuring maritime security.

International Initiatives Supporting Maritime Security

In 2008, pirate attacks on more than 100 vessels off the shores of the Horn of Africa caused alarm across the Western Indian Ocean Islands which sought the help of the international community to confront these challenges collectively. The islands of the Western Indian Ocean were fully supportive of these initiatives which contributed to securing our waters. Given the gravity of the unfolding events, the reaction of the international community was spontaneous

as showcased below.

First, the ATALANTA Operation, formerly the EU NAVFOR Somalia which was launched in 2008, has played a vital role in the EU Common Security and Defense Policy and the EU's Naval Diplomacy for the Indo-Pacific. The ATALANTA as a collective initiative of the European Union in support of UN Security Council Resolutions to fight Somali piracy has been supporting the Coastal States of the Indian Ocean in the combined effort for peace, stability and maritime security. It offers a permanent protection to vulnerable vessels within the area of protection, tackles piracy and armed robbery at sea, and exercises prevention, deterrence and repression at sea and combats illicit maritime flows.

Secondly, in response to UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1851 of 16 December 2008, an ad-hoc international governance mechanism, namely the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) was established on 14 January 2009. The creation of the Contact Group was an unprecedented international naval effort comprising more than 30 countries working together to combat piracy.

Thirdly, on 29 January 2009, nineteen countries adopted the Djibouti Code of Conduct, a cooperation agreement against piracy and armed robbery at sea. The same year, the UNSC authorized the deployment of multilateral naval forces to conduct counter-piracy patrols in the Indian Ocean region to secure safe transit of naval vessels and respond to piracy attacks.

Lastly, the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) is a multinational partnership comprising 43 nations including Australia, Canada, Djibouti, France, India, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, the UAE, the UK and the USA, amongst others. The CMF is engaged in combating illicit non-state actors on the high seas and promoting security and stability across 3.2 million square miles of international waters which encompass the world's most important shipping lanes.

These concerted efforts have not only pushed

back piracy as from 2015 through the intervention of the patrol vessels enhancing maritime security but continue to deter maritime crime in the Western Indian Ocean through capacity-building efforts, regional training and information sharing.

Regional Initiatives

While the Island States of the Western Indian Ocean Region are fully appreciative of the international initiatives driven by the European Union and the United States, a coordinated approach at the regional level must feed into the international framework. It goes without saying that the support of the international players is indispensable for the success of the regional initiatives.

In that regard, I wish to recall that from 2018 to 2023, with the collaboration of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and the European Union (EU), Mauritius has hosted three Ministerial Conferences on Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean.

At the opening of the 1st Ministerial Conference, the Honorable Prime Minister of Mauritius stated the following: "Alone, none of our countries can fight the illegal traffic in our oceans, the spoliation of our seas or the growing threats to insecurity in our waters. Even collectively, the challenges are major issues. But if we can agree on ways and means to work together and to share information and coordinate our actions, we can surely do better than we are doing now. Let us join forces to make this happen."

Mauritius took inspiration from this mission statement, particularly on the importance of a collective approach. Five years later, the words have been translated into action as the emergence of a Maritime Security Architecture, anchored within the IOC is operational, well beyond its primary objectives of combating piracy. Indeed, through the nascent Maritime Security Architecture, the IOC covers all maritime crimes and threats within and beyond the zones of each country calling for more coordinated approaches

at the regional level.

The Maritime Security program (MASE), which is funded by the European Union is based on two regional agreements. The Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre, which is based in Madagascar, aims to deepen Maritime Domain Awareness and ensure the sharing and exchange of marine information between its national focal points and regional centers. Additionally, the Regional Coordination of Operations Centre based in Seychelles conducts missions of regional interest and organizes joint interventions at sea or in the overlying space.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) founded in 1997, today comprises 23 Member States and ten Dialogue Partners. The vision of the IORA originated during a visit by late South African President Nelson Mandela to India in 1995, when he stated the following: "The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic cooperation".

A few years later, in 2011-2013, during India's Chairmanship, the issue of maritime security was brought to the forefront of the IORA Agenda as one of the six priority areas of the organization. Given its broad membership, it is undeniable that the IORA, through its maritime priority and outlook for the Indo-Pacific will be called upon in shaping the Indo-Pacific vision for a shared and more secure maritime space in the Indian Ocean.



INS Mumbai makes a port call at Port Louis, Mauritius during a two-month long deployment to the Western and Southern Indian Ocean Region, October 2014.

Beyond the region, at another level, the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region situated in India operates as a collaborative Maritime Safety and Security with a view to enhancing maritime domain awareness through information sharing and cooperation with 22 countries including Australia, France, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and the United States, amongst others.

As a Member of the IOC, the IORA, the Colombo Security Conclave and of the Djibouti Code of Conduct, Mauritius contributes collectively in ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

It is worth highlighting, yet again, that the Chagos Archipelago, including Diego Garcia, forms an integral part of the territory of Mauritius. Diego Garcia hosts a US military base. Mauritius has publicly committed to the continued operation of this base, subject to respect of international law. This is also part of our endeavor to contribute to the maritime security of the Indian Ocean.

Drug Trafficking and Substance Abuse in the Indian Ocean

The Western Indian Ocean has emerged as a transshipment hub for drugs. It is estimated that 40-50 tons of heroin transits the Western Indian Ocean into East Africa each year on their way to Europe and the United States. There is also a linkage between the movement of drugs and illicit financing and terrorism activities. In that context, the Honorable Prime Minister of Mauritius took the initiative to host the First Ministerial Conference on Drug Trafficking and Substance Abuse in the Western Indian Ocean on 24 April 2024.

The Conference called on the international community to enhance assistance to the Western Indian Ocean States in the fight against proceeds of drug related crimes and money laundering. Participants from twenty-four countries acknowledged that the region is facing serious challenges in combating drug trafficking due to the introduction of new psychoactive substances and an upsurge in the volume of drugs trafficked.

The meeting also welcomed the setting up of a

Regional Drugs Observatory as a valuable resource for the region in collecting and disseminating factual and comparable information.

The Way Forward

My participation in the Indian Ocean Conference organized by the India Foundation in Perth in February 2024 leads me to underscore the merits of a collective approach to maritime security in the region, encompassing both countries of the North and of the South, whose destinies are intertwined.

I, therefore, take the view that the India Foundation, or an entity with similar noble objectives, may spearhead strategic dialogue towards collaborative maritime security architecture. I am also of the view that we may avail of the expertise of the Munich Security Conference which has 60 years of experience in such strategic initiatives.

The objective of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) is indeed a common denominator; without security there is no growth and the only way to achieve maritime security is through shared experiences. Such a sharing requires dialogue at a strategic level while simultaneously building on past experiences from around the globe. We can ultimately create the necessary maritime security architecture to make an IMPACT in our region through the Indian Ocean Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (IMPACT).



His Excellency Mr. Maneesh Gobin, Foreign Minister of Mauritius

Honorable Maneesh Gobin is currently the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade of Mauritius. His Excellency was appointed to this position on 30 August 2023. From 14 September 2017 onwards, the Honourable Mr. Gobin was appointed Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Human Rights and Institutional. Prior to this appointment, His Excellency was the Minister of Agro-Industry and Food Security prior to his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade on 30 August 2023.

Under the “Mouvement Socialiste Militant” (MSM), Mr. Maneesh Gobin was elected as Member of Parliament on 11 December 2014, and re-elected on 08 November 2019. His Excellency was appointed as the Secretary-General of the MSM in 2020.

Honorable Maneesh Gobin studied Law at the University of Mauritius and was admitted as barrister in February 1999. He served in the legal and judicial services of Mauritius including as Senior State Counsel and Senior District Magistrate.

India in the Indian Ocean

CONTINENTAL AND MARITIME INDIA: LINKAGES AND CONUNDRUMS

Rear Admiral Sudarshan Y Shrikhande (Retd)



INS Mormugao is seen docked at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai on the eve of its commissioning into the Indian Navy. | Indian Ministry of Defence.

Introduction

An astute maritime strategist, Julian Corbett famously wrote, “Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.”¹ While Corbett was referring to the use of armies and navies in joint military strategies, a higher derivative of this statement could be used to examine the linkages and conundrums of national strategies that simultaneously contend with a nation’s continentality and “maritimeness.”² I have coined the term maritimeness to describe the role of the sea as an environment as well as a vital geopolitical and geophysical entity across the dimensions of statecraft.

The Two Dimensions

Strategic histories of most nations show that continental (that is, territorial) dimensions and contexts are not only fundamental to a sense of nationhood (“because man lives upon the land”) but are central to our understanding of sovereignty and statehood. They loom large in our domestic politics.

Nonetheless, the centrality of continentality can wax or wane, especially in the military dimension when viewed within the Diplomatic, Informational/Intelligence, Military and Economic (DIME) framework of statecraft. Similarly, maritimeness can also witness ups and downs.

Let us consider four examples for our understanding – the Americans, the Russians, the French and the Germans and, the Chinese.

The Americans

Consider the fledgling United States (“the Thirteen Colonies”) and the home country, King George III’s England.³ The coloniser’s maritimeness was born out of becoming a trading nation that owned several ships, and had a strong, global Navy. It had a developing financial/banking system and global corporations – not unlike modern-day Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) – that were coming up against opposition to British ambitions in North America.

Continental pressures of expansion, resistance and battles with the French, the Native Americans and even the Caucasian settlers drew Britain into a continental War of American Independence. The War was primarily land-centric as far as the aptly named American Continental Army was concerned. In the War of 1812 (to 1815 in effect), maritime rights and freedoms, trade wars and naval battles were important triggers. However, the real fights were over territory.

During the US Civil War, there were naval battles, expeditionary landings, trade protection and interdiction efforts. However, the grim campaigns for the sustenance of the Northern states’ way of life and the South’s decision to secede resulted in the greatest number of death and destruction the Americans have suffered in wars thus far.⁴ It was only after the Spanish-American War at the turn of the 19th-20th Centuries that the US started to look more like a virtual island-nation with oceans on either side and relatively weak continental neighbours.

We must remember, nonetheless, that both Canada (1812-1814) and then Mexico (1846-1848) were subdued and then held in check by American armies until they became the ‘good neighbours’ that could almost always be taken for granted. In effect, the US was now more like Britain: an island that had prospered through its empire underwritten mainly by its maritimeness and secured by its global navy and national as well as colonial armies. The US then began to prosper through its maritimeness and its continental

riches while ramping up its naval power. As we shall see a little later, these dynamics did not lead to assured outcomes for either in terms of statecraft.⁵

The Russians

On the other side of the Atlantic, lay the Russian and later the Soviet Empire. Even the Communists presided over a de-facto empire that was almost wholly created through statecraft comprising conquest, diplomacy, and the power of Russian/Soviet Armies instead of the Tsarist Navy. In fact, it is important to remember that “in 1462, the grand prince of Moscow ruled over 24,000 square kilometres. In 1914, Nicholas ruled over a territory of 13.5 million square kilometres. The Tsarist state was one of the most effective mechanisms for territorial expansion ever known.”⁶

Despite losing more than a dozen republics and several Warsaw Pact allies by 1991, Russia still remains the largest nation on Earth, albeit with new and legacy national strategic challenges. Russian and Soviet maritimeness was never quite as central to its prosperity nor even to its security to an extent because circumstances – including the structure of the Imperial as well as Soviet societies – never made them as mercantilist as the British (or earlier the Dutch) and the Americans.

The French and the Germans

Briefly, these two imperial and then republican empires/nations offer a different combination of maritimeness and continentality. Through much of their existence, they have had powerful continental adversaries, sometimes on multiple fronts. Their expansionist ambitions led to both continental as well as naval power but brought them into greater confrontation with other powers in the maritime as well as continental dimensions. Given the greater degree of

autocratic rule, they were less successful in the maritimeness of their national prosperity and security than the others mentioned before.⁷

Are the Chinese an Exception?

This is a difficult question to address. Historically, China has been a continental state often with multiple adversarial neighbours. While it traded extensively in ancient times, it was not particularly mercantilist in the Middle Ages and until about the 1990s. In the last few decades, the world has seen a more productive, economically active, richer, assertive and engaged China. This needs no elaboration.

It has also mitigated its adversarial environment along its continental borders, notably with Russia. After all, the world's longest land border and relations between the two are now the strongest in decades. Chinese maritimeness has contributed to its prosperity and it seeks to enhance its maritime security not only in the Western Pacific but also in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Unlike the examples seen above, China's mercantilism has been within the bounds of growing authoritarianism and the supremacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Its instruments for influence are different from colonial-imperial times and in these factors, we could count the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) as its foremost strategic initiative.

Beijing's steady—and no longer discreet—moves into territorializing the South China Sea (SCS) is without precedent. In a sense, these moves have shades of a new maritimeness but it is more an expanding continental strategy with some maritime characteristics.

If incorrect, inflated and illegal claims in the SCS littoral have created domestic political pride within the People's Republic of China (PRC),

these create domestic political anxieties in some countries contesting these claims. Additionally, its closest maritime neighbours do not see eye-to-eye and behave as continental neighbours separated by relatively narrow bodies of water.

Higher-level Linkages

India has to consider linkages and conundrums of these two continental and maritime strands. They are complementary, not contradictory. Nor are they as exclusive or separated as the terms may suggest. The scholar Zorawar Daulat Singh makes an important point: "We also need to be careful how we think about the continental versus maritime binary."⁸ He adds that, "the continental and maritime facets of India's immediate geopolitical environment around the subcontinent entails opportunities and risks; opportunities for new geoeconomic connections but also risks of costly security competitions."

These two strategies need to be seen in conjunction rather than competition. Part of the narrative in India overstates India's maritimeness in terms of share of global trade which is still on the lower side, even as there is optimism about its growth. According to WTO's Global Trade Outlook, India's share of global trade was a modest 1.8% in 2023 for exports (global rank 17th) and 2.8% for imports (global rank 8). The running trade deficit influences overall economic sinews. Services trade (some of it via submarine cables) rose to 6% in 2023 from 4.4% in 2019.

Due to low trade between India and its continental neighbours, goods and services trade is well below its potential. Of the four dimensions of the DIME framework, India has some way to go in the "E" for economics.



INS Sahyadri participating in India-Indonesia-Australia trilateral exercise. | Press Information Bureau.

Diplomatic and Military Lines

Whether geo-strategic theorists like Mackinder, Spykman, Mahan and Corbett are directly applicable, it does not detract from the evidence that the Chinese seem to have studied them well to use as points of reference as well as departure.⁹

For some years now, China has been a veritable maritime neighbour of India and has influence around borders like a contiguous rimland with neighbours like Pakistan. This is as much an issue for the “M” in India’s DIME as it is for the “D” in diplomacy. Some other neighbours are also under Chinese influence in a way that is an additional challenge for India’s diplomacy.¹⁰

China is more of a maritime state than it ever was and has several legitimate reasons for being one, as India aspires for the same. However, it is the reality of China’s steady growth in ownership/management or partial ownership of ports, shipping, shipbuilding, insurance, its gradually increasing “places and bases,” growing military hardware, training, or the frequency, and scope of military exercises that creates concerns.

As a maritime state, it also exhibits a historic reality for India that maritime power and

consequent maritime security in times of tension and conflict, depends on allies and partners by whatever nomenclature.

This debate was not unknown or unactioned even in early medieval India. For instance, the Pandyan king Ganapatideva and his daughter Rudramba did much to control and even stamp out piracy to make the seas safer from China to Zanzibar. This included embassies to the court of Roman emperor Augustus (1st BCE) and other states in the Arab world and in some IOR islands seeking maritime security cooperation.¹¹

All this suggests at least three important facets.

First, there was a wider Indo-Pacific canvas and proximate interests of Indian trading kingdoms within which the IOR was the focus. Without stretching the analogy, there was a good sense of an effective conception of what we now term ‘Freedom of the Indo-Pacific’.

The second was the realization that on the larger canvas of oceans, cooperation between states was not only desirable but also necessary. Hence, the expression ‘global navy’ is overstated. At no stage, even during the peaks of Pax Britannica or Pax Americana, was any single navy able to sustain the world order; this was true even during the two World Wars.

If there were no 'Quads' then, there certainly were double and triple alliances and groups of five. The securitization of maritime trade, the effective use of sea power and navigation freedoms have benefited from partnerships. India realized this in the 1971 War when the Indo-Soviet Treaty's Article 9 was in play in the IOR with specific beneficial impacts in the Bay of Bengal.¹²

Third, even as there seem to be occasional misgivings in Indian scholarly circles about the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the downplaying of the inclusion of 'security' as not having any military connotation,¹³ the Chinese seem to be furthering their own variants of the Quad, colloquially termed the PRIC (Pakistan, Russia, Iran and China).¹⁴

India's Strategic Complexity

Like some nations or empires of history, India's strategic situation has its greatest complexity and problems in its continentality. It seems unlikely that India can turn China and Pakistan into friendly neighbours like Canada and Mexico or the US. It would also be a mistake to think of the criticality of the continental dimension to the primacy of a continental strategy where military land power is then conflated with the Army while the other four dimensions of warfare are treated as adjuncts.

The reality of adversarial borders and the continental imperatives of national strategy seem to show a hierarchy of conflation. Thus, continental strategies are conflated with land power, in turn land power with the Army. This is not to overlook the need for a powerful army for India but to avoid ideas of the primacy of one dimension over the rest.

Furthermore, I want to explore the relationship between maritime and air dimensions. The air dimension of warfare has been vital across decades but there is no conclusive evidence that it is the omni-potent dimension. Victory in war requires more than superiority in the air or maritime theatre. There are some risks in over-interpreting the maritime dimension (especially in its naval derivative) as some sort of a game-changer or trump card. As seen earlier, good strategies are usually multi-dimensional with no clearly superior dimension regardless of context, circumstances, and an adversary's counterstrategies.

I will elaborate with four illustrations:

1. What applied to imperial Britain, could not always be applied to other states. Thalassocracies were never so clearly non-continental or could afford to ignore land power as has been thought even in the case of Athens and Sparta. These sorts of binaries are tempting, but not supported by analysis. It is essentially correct that maritime democracies are more successful at trade for a slew of reasons; but China and a few Southeast Asian "tigers" in the 1970s and 1980s were big traders but not as democratic as they are now. The Chinese example has already been mentioned. What is more applicable is that democracies that trade and are involved in ensuring a better, freer life for its own citizens are more likely to partner with others to cooperate and avoid conflicts.
2. The history of wars does show that overwhelming naval power is vital but not the linchpin for ultimate military victory, which has often required a man with a weapon in hand. It can be said that at the end of the Korean, Vietnamese and the US conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US Navy emerged stronger than at the start of the war but it could not itself ensure an overall strategic victory. Nations usually and ultimately have to win or lose on land but sea power and airpower or space and cyberpower could be vital players in that victory. Corbett's words are insightful: "... the world has become so deeply impressed with the efficacy of sea

power that we are inclined to forget how impotent it is of itself to decide a war against a great Continental state, how tedious is the pressure of naval action unless it be nicely coordinated with military and diplomatic pressure.”¹⁵ What Corbett so clearly expresses is the need for DIME frameworks of national strategies to configure statecraft through multi-dimensionality, cooperation and consonance. This formulation works across the hierarchy of derivatives from national strategy to military strategy and its execution.

3. Airpower need not be seen as a third dimension to the continental and maritime. In its application, it transcends both and is extremely important to military effectiveness and outcomes.
4. For regions, geopolitical organizations and treaties, a maritime nomenclature could work better than a more directly terrestrial one. Thus, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is used by some and not by others like China and Russia. Or, NATO was less about the North Atlantic as it was about the USSR but seemed more suitable and has endured longer than the corresponding Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, better known as the Warsaw Pact.

Conclusion

India’s continentality and maritimeness in tandem are the key to its overall security, as well as vital to maintaining deterrence in South Asia, not in an absolute sense but adequately. On a larger IOR canvas, it will help regional states with a greater sense of reassurance. This assurance will be tested by rivals via proxies demanding more astute statecraft across the DIME framework. This would provide greater assurance not only to Indians but also across the populations of regional countries.

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He is an adjunct professor at the Indian Naval War College, Goa and earlier with the Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru. He is the inaugural Editor-in-Chief of the Indian Naval Despatch since 2020. From March 2023, he is an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security, University of Wollongong. He has submitted a PhD on sea-based nuclear deterrence in November 2023. He was awarded the Ati Vashisht Sena Medal in 2015.

INDIA'S MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar (Retd)



Indian and international naval officers at Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Maritime Exercise 2023 (IMEX-23), Bangkok. | Indian Ministry of Defence.

Introduction

For a maritime nation like India, its conception of maritime security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and specifically, its approach to maritime security has a long historical legacy.¹ In 1946, KM Panikkar had stated that “Unless India is prepared to stand forth and shoulder the responsibility of peace and security in the Indian Ocean, her freedom will mean but little”, and that “India's future therefore is closely bound up with the strength she is able to develop gradually as a naval power.”²

The Cold War saw delineations in the IOR between the USA and the erstwhile Soviet Union, and the superpower rivalry placed India closer to the Soviet camp. The mistrust that flowed from the Cold War years limited India's vision of regional maritime security while it sought avenues of détente with the IOR nations by building a

position of stability and trust while negotiating to shed the tag of ‘regional hegemon’.³

Over time, several shibboleths were shed as India's strategic outlook evolved and the aspect of India's maritime security was perhaps guided by K Subrahmanyam's argument that “diplomacy and military power are mutually reinforcing, not each other's substitute”.⁴

This approach led to the development of better relations with most of its neighbours and the regional IOR nations, with India being seen as a regional power and a stable nation with no hegemonic interests. The emergence of an increased element of trust, better relations with

the IOR nations, and cooperation at regional organisations saw an enhanced outreach by India using both soft and hard power to ensure stability, security and peace in the IOR's maritime domain.

India's Maritime Strategy

According to Norman Hartman, Foreign Policy is "a systematic statement of deliberately selected national interests."⁵ India's maritime security strategy – which is an important integral part of its foreign policy – took time to evolve for a variety of reasons. This evolution reflects a systematic approach wherein several elements of national power were used.

These consisted of a mix of the soft and hard power aspects, inter alia of diplomacy, economics, and military power. India's growth as a rising economic power and recognition as a 'Preferred Security Partner and First Responder', and the spurt of strategic partnerships with many nations, has seen the evolution of a set of contemporary concepts and initiatives that are dealt with the working groups of IOR regional organisations headed by a lead nation. India works mainly through these structures and frameworks with regional nations to address the non-traditional threats that impact the IOR.

Structures, Frameworks and Engagements

Over time maritime security evolved as an accepted global term covering Freedom of Navigation that resonated at the national, regional and global levels, and naval power metamorphosed into maritime power that enveloped both hard and soft power attributes. Post the Cold War and the emergence of new strategic alignments and strategic partnerships, maritime cooperation that started as a buzzword became a mantra.

In this new security environment, India's contemporary approach to maritime security was placed under the broad umbrella of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), a

concept that can be replicated in any maritime region of the world. Under SAGAR, India's maritime engagements within the IOR can be clubbed under several structures and frameworks like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Neighbourhood First, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), multilaterals, institutionalised maritime exercises and mission-based deployments.

The central focus of these engagements, which are based on inclusivity, is on non-traditional threats that threaten the stability, security and peace of the region. Further, central to these structures and frameworks, is a common thread that seeks to address threats, challenges and risks arising from the maritime domain while maximising on the cooperative opportunities that arise as part of the addressal mechanism.

This inclusive approach was extended to India's concept of the Indo-Pacific Region and amplified in India's vision of a 'free, open and inclusive' Indo-Pacific. At the international level the importance of maritime security was highlighted by Prime Minister Modi during the first ever open maritime security debate, Enhancing Maritime Security – A Case for International Cooperation at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 9 August 2021. The debate was held under India's Presidency of the UNSC, and the following five basic principles were discussed which indicate the holistic manner of India's approach to maritime security:⁶

1. Removal of barriers from legitimate maritime trade.
2. Peaceful settlement of disputes as per international law.
3. Joint addressal of natural disasters and maritime threats created by non-state actors.

4. Preservation of the marine environment and resources.
5. Encouragement of responsible maritime connectivity.



INS Talwar successfully apprehended a suspicious dhow in support of Combined Task Force 150-led focussed operation Crimson Barracuda, recovering 940 kilograms of narcotics, March 2024. | Indian Navy.

Territorial instability always impacts the security and peace of the surrounding marine environment. Hence, stability is a major factor, as any reduction or loss of stability leads to an unsafe environment that harbours and supports non-state actors. These actors thrive on and drive non-traditional threats like maritime crimes, especially terrorism; piracy; the smuggling of guns, drugs and humans; and as seen more recently the new phenomena of attacks on merchant shipping in the Red Sea by the Houthis.

While the Houthi actions are a threat and challenge that is part/subset of an ongoing traditional conflict, it has added to the instability and also aided the resurgence of another non-traditional threat: piracy. The overarching impact of a combination of such non-traditional threats has far-reaching effects on a region and the nations within.

For example, the impact on India's economy from November 2023 to 31 March 2024, due to the Houthi attacks, has been assessed as 30 billion USD.⁷ While India may be able to absorb this initial impact, the impact on smaller nations could be worse.

While actions to address the Houthi threat are dictated by the complex web of traditional state-on-state relations, the resurgence of piracy would need readdressing as done before. India's addressal of piracy has been successful as proven by Indian Navy deployments, the earlier experience of dealing with pirates including effective use of kinetic means and cooperation with different navies brought about by increasing interoperability through capacity and capability

building.

Capacity- and capability-building find resonance across all the regional organisations of the IORs, especially in maritime security, safety and disaster risk management. Hence, it also forms an important part of India's maritime security strategy and is applied both domestically and as well as regionally. Regional efforts add to enhanced interoperability and therefore, better cooperative mechanisms.

In dealing with non-traditional threats, India's maritime security strategy aims at strengthening three pillars: the promotion of stability; the maintenance of security and the preservation of peace. This approach has been mentioned in the third constituent strategy *Shaping a Favourable and Positive Maritime Environment* as outlined in the Indian Navy's 2015 unclassified strategy document, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015)*.⁸ The idea is to "to promote security and stability at sea, and enhance cooperation, mutual understanding and interoperability with maritime forces of friendly nations."⁹ thereby shaping a suitable maritime environment beneficial for the IOR under the rubric of SAGAR.

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Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar (Retd)

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He was a Research Fellow at the MP-IDSA and worked in the Indian Navy's strategic apex level offices where – as Director Strategy – was part of the core team that published the Indian Navy's unclassified maritime security strategy document titled Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy in 2015. Captain Parmar carried out regional maritime assessments and completed the doctrine development plan. He is presently a Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India, New Delhi, and Council of Strategic and Defence Research, New Delhi.

THE ROLE OF INDIA'S MERCHANT NAVY IN MARITIME GOVERNANCE

Kuljinder K. (Jeena) Cheema



Indian Navy warship escorting a merchant vessel | gcaptain.com

In April 2024, Admiral DK Tripathi assumed office as India's 26th Chief of Naval Staff. This article encourages the Admiral to take input from the deck plate to lead the way towards meeting objectives. An area of improvement includes the role of Merchant Mariners.

India's Merchant Mariners: A Vital Component of the Nation's Maritime Defense

Merchant Marines tend to get step treatment as they are not a government agency or military service in most countries. The full-scale coordination between the Indian Navy, Merchant Mariners, and the Coast Guard is a vital component of India's maritime defense. India is the third-largest supplier of sailors to the global shipping industry, after China and the Philippines, providing roughly 7% of the world's Merchant Mariners.

As of March 2024, estimates suggest India has around 250,000 seafarers, with 160,000 working on cargo ships and 90,000 on cruise liners.¹ This number has grown by about 270% over the past decade, and industry experts predict that India's share of global seafarers could increase to 20% over the next decade. India's Navy Merchant Mariners play a crucial role in ensuring the smooth operation and co-ordination between the nation's merchant fleet and its naval service. Merchant Mariners link the commercial shipping industry to the Indian Navy, providing essential support in times of national security and emergencies.

The Merchant Mariners of India are trained professionals who operate merchant vessels that transport goods and commodities across the seas. While their primary responsibility is to ensure the safe and efficient transportation of cargo, they also play a crucial role in supporting the Indian Navy in times of need.



India's first female Merchant Navy captain, Captain Radhika Menon, April 2024. | International Women Seafarers Association.

Merchant Mariners are often called upon to assist the Navy in times of war or national emergencies. They may be tasked with transporting military personnel, equipment or supplies to areas of conflict or disaster. In such situations, Merchant Mariners must work closely with the Navy to ensure the safe and timely delivery of goods and services.

India has a merchant fleet of nearly 1,500 seagoing ships with a total capacity of 13 million gross tonnes (GT), accounting for about 1.3% of the world's total deadweight tonnage.² However, about 36% of India's merchant fleet is flagged outside of the country, which is a geopolitical imbalance. For example, India's growing imports and exports are carried on foreign-owned ships.³ In a war-like situation, India would have to consider the reliability of its home-owned ships to transport energy and food supplies.

Coordination between the Merchant Mariners and the Navy is essential for the success of any operation. The two entities must work together seamlessly to ensure that missions are carried out effectively and efficiently. This requires open communication, mutual respect and a willingness to extensively and rigorously collaborate for the greater good of confluent operations using advanced digital methods in places such as the Red Sea. Notably, due to the rise of digitization and automation in the maritime industry, ships are increasingly interconnected and reliant on technology. This has opened up new vulnerabilities to cyberattacks, which can have devastating consequences for both the crew's safety and the vessel's security. Cyberattacks on ships can range from hacking into the ship's systems and causing physical damage to stealing sensitive information and disrupting operations.

In order to prevent and mitigate these risks, it is essential for India's global seafarers to receive cybersecurity training. This training should cover a range of topics, including how to

recognize and respond to cyber threats, safeguard sensitive information and secure onboard systems and networks. Seafarers should also be trained on how to properly use and maintain the technology onboard the vessel as well as identify and report any suspicious activity.

In addition to their roles in national defense and emergencies, Merchant Mariners also play a vital role in supporting the economy and international trade. The shipping industry is a key driver of economic growth in India, and Merchant Mariners are at the forefront of ensuring the smooth flow of goods and services across the oceans.

India's Navy Merchant Mariners are an essential component of the nation's maritime defense and economic prosperity. They play a critical role in coordinating with the Indian Navy to ensure the safety and security of the seas and support the nation's economy through international trade. Their dedication, professionalism, and commitment to serving the Nation is commendable, and they deserve recognition for their essential contributions to India's maritime industry.

Non-traditional Grey-zone Tactics

The conflict in Yemen, which has been ongoing since 2014, has had far-reaching consequences beyond the country's borders. One of the most concerning developments in the conflict has been the use of non-traditional maritime grey-zone tactics by the Houthi rebels in the Red Sea. These tactics have significantly impacted maritime trade routes and the security of countries in the region, including India.

Grey-zone tactics refer to the use of unconventional and ambiguous methods to achieve strategic objectives. In the case of the Houthis in the Red Sea, these tactics have

included the use of asymmetric warfare, such as mines and other explosive devices, to target commercial vessels and disrupt maritime traffic. Additionally, the Houthis have also engaged in illicit activities such as smuggling and piracy to fund their operations and further destabilize the region.

Admiral Tripathi must consider the impact of these non-traditional maritime tactics on India. As a significant player in global trade, India relies heavily on the maritime routes passing through the Red Sea to transport goods and energy resources. Any disruption to these routes can have serious economic consequences for India and other countries that rely on the free flow of maritime trade in the region.

As recently as March 2024, India brought 35 captured Somali pirates to Mumbai to stand trial for hijacking the cargo vessel MV Ruen in December. This marks the first time in over a decade that pirates captured at sea will be brought to Indian shores to face trial. The Somalis will be prosecuted under India's anti-piracy laws, facing potential death sentences if convicted of killing or attempted killing, and life imprisonment for piracy. The Navy's intensified anti-piracy efforts have resulted in significant success, with the rescue of the MV Ruen and its crew, as well as the capture of the pirates.

These pirates are suspected of being involved in the hijacking of the bulk carrier MV Abdullah, highlighting the ongoing threat of piracy in the region. The Indian Navy's deployments and operations have been crucial in combating piracy and maritime attacks in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It was noted that at the peak of their attacks in 2011, Somali pirates cost the global economy an estimated \$7 billion in ransom payments.⁴

Furthermore, the instability caused by the Houthi tactics in the Red Sea has also raised security

concerns for India. The possibility of attacks on commercial vessels carrying Indian goods or personnel is a real threat that must be taken seriously. The need for increased maritime security measures in the region is now more urgent than ever, as the risk of further escalation of conflict and violence remains high.

The non-traditional maritime grey-zone tactics used by the Houthi rebels in the Red Sea have significantly impacted maritime trade routes and security in the region, including India. It is imperative that the international community take steps to address these tactics and ensure the safety and security of the maritime routes in the Red Sea. Failure to do so may have dire consequences for the global economy and the stability of the region as a whole.

In comparison, China's Maritime Militia, for example, has been a source of concern for many countries in the region, especially as its size and capabilities continue to grow. The Maritime Militia is a paramilitary force that operates alongside the Chinese Navy and Coast Guard, carrying out a range of missions from maritime surveillance to assisting in territorial disputes. With an estimated size of around 190,000 personnel, the Maritime Militia is one of the largest paramilitary forces in the world.

One of the key areas of concern regarding China's Maritime Militia is its impact on maritime channels, particularly in the South China Sea. China's militia has been accused of engaging in aggressive tactics to assert Chinese territorial claims in the region, including ramming foreign vessels and harassing fishermen from neighboring countries. This has led to tensions with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, who also have claims in the South China Sea.

The presence of China's Maritime Militia has also impacted India's maritime industry. Like many other countries in the region, India relies heavily on maritime channels for trade and commerce. The aggressive actions of the Maritime Militia have

raised concerns about the safety and security of these channels, leading to increased patrols and security measures by the Indian Navy.

In response to the growing threat posed by China's Maritime Militia, countries in the region have called for greater cooperation and coordination to ensure the stability and security of maritime channels. The United States has also stepped up its presence in the region, conducting freedom of navigation operations to challenge China's territorial claims and assert the rights of all countries to navigate freely in international waters.

As China's Maritime Militia continues to grow in size and capabilities, it is clear that it will remain a significant factor in regional maritime security. It is essential for countries in the region to work together to address this threat and ensure the safety and security of maritime channels for all. Only through cooperation and coordination can we hope to effectively counter the growing influence of China's Maritime Militia and uphold the principles of freedom of navigation and international law in the region.

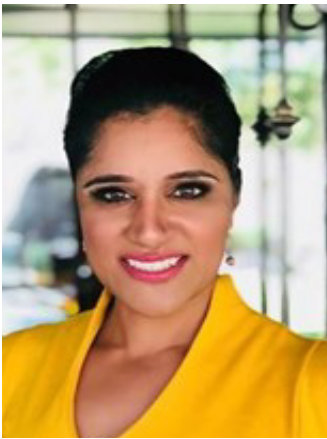
Indo-Pacific Center of Excellence (COE) for Maritime Governance

The Indo-Pacific region faces significant maritime security challenges due to natural disasters, criminal activities and interstate tensions, leading to loss of life and threats to regional stability. A proposed solution is establishing an Indo-Pacific Center of Excellence (COE) for Maritime Governance to address maritime security issues primarily caused by governance insufficiency.⁵ This COE would help improve maritime safety and security by providing skills training, research, capacity-building coordination, best

practices development and fostering regional cooperation.

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THE INDIAN AND CHINESE NAVIES AGAINST THE HOUTHIS: A CASE STUDY

Siddhant Hira



INS Kolkata providing firefighting and residual risk assessment assistance to Liberian-flagged MV MSC Sky-II southeast of Aden, March 2024. | Indian Navy.

Introduction

On 14 November 2023, Yemen's Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi announced: "Our eyes are open to constantly monitor and search for any Israeli ship in the Red Sea, especially in the Bab al-Mandab, and near Yemeni regional waters".¹ A day later, Houthi spokesperson Yahya Sare'e tweeted, "As part of its military operations against the Israeli enemy, the Armed Forces confirm that [we] will begin implementing the directives in terms of taking the appropriate measures against any Israeli vessel in the Red Sea."² This was the start of a non-state actor targeting the commercial interests of state actors in the Western Indian Ocean. It could also be considered as the maritime spill-over of the territorial Israel-Hamas War.

But the Houthis have not just targeted Israeli vessels in the Red Sea. They have attacked

non-Israeli vessels and these attacks have included the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Indian nationals, Indian vessels and Indian interests have also been threatened. This led to the commencement of Operation Sankalp – the Indian Navy's (IN's) largest deployment – coming up to 200 days now. Within the first 100 days itself, the IN has responded to 18 incidents, becoming the 'Preferred Security Partner' and 'First Responder' in the Indian Ocean Region.³ The operation involves regular patrolling and escorting Indian-flagged vessels, significantly reducing piracy attempts and ensuring the safe passage of ships through high-risk areas. Between October 2023 and April 2024, the Houthis have targeted 79 ships with 164 missiles and 265 drones.⁴ Numerous state forces have begun undertaking different actions in the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, either as part of various task forces or independently.

The Chinese Navy in the Western Indian Ocean

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN: the Chinese Navy) has a major presence in the Western Indian Ocean thanks to its Djibouti base with 2,000 troops on the ground throughout the year and a pier capable of accommodating an aircraft carrier.⁵ For the Western Indian Ocean area of operations, the PLAN strategy is 'Far Seas Protection': "non-war military operations" which include international peacekeeping, HADR, joint exercises and naval diplomacy in peacetime while in wartime, responsibilities would include protecting sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), targeting crucial assets as well as hitting the enemy's strategic depth.⁶

Until December 2023, the PLAN had protected more than 7,200 vessels across 1,600 escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia.⁷ And herein lies a key point: ability does not translate to capability. China is perhaps the only force which, despite a significant presence in the region, is not undertaking HADR operations this year. Four reasons of note include the PLAN's limited operational experience, a potential 'loss of face', strategic patience and indirect involvement by funding the Houthis.

1. Limited Operational Experience: While the PLAN is more focussed on the South China Sea, ever since 2008 it has been focussing on the Western Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean Region as a whole. In 2015, it is believed that China deployed a fast-attack nuclear attack submarine (SSN: Submersible ship nuclear) of the Type 093 Shang-class.⁸ It is unheard of to involve a submarine in anti-piracy operations, that too a nuclear submarine, and more specifically, an SSN. Due to their lack of ability to undertake surface operations, SSNs are not the best assets for this tasking; it highlights China's

ulterior strategic motive of employing such sub-surface platforms for prolonged operations in the IOR.⁹

2. Loss of Face: In Chinese culture and society, 'loss of face' is an aspect intrinsic to their core identity, and this also extends to foreign and military policy. Loss of face is closely linked to China's ambition to be a daguo ('great power'), and this notion has always had historical continuity. However, analysis of the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Archive demonstrates that of the 554 times daguo appeared in this archive, it was mostly used to refer to China itself, 78 times of which was to refer to China as a 'responsible great power'.¹⁰

3. Strategic Patience: While China is no longer following Deng Xiaoping's strategy of "biding time and hiding capabilities", elements of it are still utilised. Deng's strategy still holds good in China's maritime domain, including in the Western Indian Ocean region. As most of the PLAN fleet is geared towards the Western Pacific Ocean rather than the Indian Ocean, it is overstretched.¹¹ But more importantly, while the PLAN's South Sea Fleet (SSF) is geographically the closest to the Western Indian Ocean, tasking and deployment is a challenge for China as "... in terms of critical naval assets such as destroyers and frigates this command is allocated less than one-third of the Chinese navy's overall vessels."¹²

China has continued with its "biding time and hiding capabilities" strategy in the maritime sphere but recognises the cruciality of the IOR and is therefore ensuring that the PLAN's SSF becomes its 'sword arm' in not just the South China Sea but also in the Indian Ocean around peninsular India.¹³ China is maintaining a passively active presence rather than an aggressively active presence in the Western Indian Ocean. Hence, China is learning from the operations of other naval forces in the region. This patience is evident in their regular rotations of naval escorts to the Gulf of Aden since 2008, primarily for anti-piracy operations but to also better understand the operational environment.

4. Indirect involvement by funding the Houthis: Reports have suggested that while

Beijing is not directly funding the Houthis, it is doing so indirectly through oil purchases from Tehran. China purchases 90 percent of Iran's oil, which includes crude oil sold by the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In 2020, a Turkish middleman in Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's inner circle had helped Iran and China sign a deal by which Tehran would sell China \$2 billion worth of oil a year, of which \$500 million was kept aside for the Quds Force.¹⁴ The capital gained from these oil sales is then utilised for training and arming Iran's proxies across the Middle East to subsequently conduct attacks.¹⁵

Given China's ambitions to be the pre-eminent global power, it periodically undermines US interests. One of the ways it does so is significant investment in the Middle East and Africa. But despite this significant investment, China is taking a backseat against the Houthis due to its oil and other energy interests from Iran and the region.

The Indian Navy in the Western Indian Ocean

The Indian Navy is getting even more recognition today for not just its deployment in the Western Indian Ocean but also its operations protecting commercial vessels and before, during as well as after inimical actions have been undertaken. This praise for the IN has taken form within as well as outside India. This section underlines the praise garnered by the IN within as well as outside India, an HADR operation (Operation Rahat, 2015), the proactive engagement in the Houthi maritime context (MV Ruen, 2024) and a pre-2023 anti-piracy operation (November 2008).

1. Indian and foreign praise of the Indian Navy: Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has stated, "The Indian Navy has become so strong that we have become the first responder in terms of security in the Indian Ocean and Indian Pacific region"¹⁶

Yogesh Joshi at the National University of Singapore has highlighted that India's naval

flexing underscores its great-power ambitions and role as a crucial component in the evolving security landscape of the IOR. The Indian Navy's forward-leaning posture is being driven by India's growing military capacity, political commitment from the Indian Prime Minister and the international maritime security environment. It is this clarity in direction and purpose that is flowing down from the Indian leadership which is driving Indian maritime strategy across the Indian Ocean and beyond.¹⁷

Western analysts have also lauded the Indian Navy's operational capabilities. John Bradford at the Council on Foreign Relations stated, "What marks this operation as impressive is how risk was minimised by using a coordinated force that includes the use of a warship, drones, fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, and marine commandos".¹⁸

Carl Schuster, a US Navy veteran Captain, praised the Indian Navy's professionalism and the rigorous training of MARCOS commandos, modelled after the US Navy SEALs and Britain's Special Boat Service. He emphasised the Navy's experience in anti-piracy operations, dating back over 20 years. "Despite a very intense selection process, only about 10% to 15% of those who enter the training graduate."¹⁹

The successful interception and rescue missions off the coast of Somalia have solidified the Indian Navy's reputation as a top-class force regarding training, command, and control. The recent rescue of the MV Ruen, a former Maltese-flagged bulk carrier, from Somali pirates further underscores this point. The nearly 40-hour operation, involving the rescue of 17 hostages and the capture of 35 pirates, showcasing the Indian Navy's world-class special forces capabilities.

2. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR): India has always followed the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and Indian Foreign Policy is no exception to it. The Indian Navy has established a strong reputation for its HADR and anti-piracy operations on the high seas in the SLOCs, gaining widespread recognition both within and outside India. These efforts have

significantly bolstered its image and efficacy as a responsible and capable maritime force in the IOR. And in recent times, especially in the Western Indian Ocean.

But more importantly through its HADR efforts, the Indian Navy is also matching its ability with its capability. Occasionally, capability will exceed ability, and that is when India's navy goes above and beyond. The Indian Navy's quick and effective responses to natural disasters have earned it widespread acclaim both domestically and internationally.

In Operation Rahat (2015)²⁰, a single ship of the Indian Navy – INS Sumitra (with 151 personnel onboard) – rescued more than 1,600 stranded Indians and people from 26 countries during an active civil war.²¹ The ship had made three trips between three different locations off the Yemeni coast and Djibouti, where it was offloading the rescued civilians. Ten minutes was all that the INS Sumitra's crew needed to set course for the port of Aden. For each time the Sumitra entered unfamiliar waters, its prahar (eight-man team of Marine Commandos: MARCOS²²) would ensure there was a secure bubble around the ship. A few hours after rescuing Indians from Aden and de-boarding them in Djibouti, INS Sumitra set sail for Al Hudaydah.

These processes were repeated on the Djibouti-Al Mukalla and Yemen-Djibouti legs of the trips as well. INS Sumitra returned two more times to Al Mukalla. Less than three weeks later, the Sumitra was ordered to resume its anti-piracy patrol operation in the Gulf of Aden, only returning to her home port of Chennai of more than two months. And all of this was done by a ship that was just six months old and on its first humanitarian mission at the time.

But more than the Indian Navy's HADR operations, its anti-piracy operations against recent Houthi maritime actions have cemented itself as a reliable maritime security provider.

3. Proactive Engagement in the Houthi Maritime Context: With the rise of Houthi maritime attacks in late 2023, the IN has taken a proactive stance, conducting more frequent, intensive and comprehensive patrols. This proactive approach has been widely appreciated by both domestic and international actors, showcasing the IN's commitment to safeguarding maritime interests in the region. If the Indian Navy's endeavours on the high seas away from its territorial waters did not receive the attention it has deserved until now, its operation against the hijacked Merchant Vessel (MV) Ruen has certainly changed opinions and awareness.²³

Along with the Indian Air Force, the Indian Navy inserted two of its combat boats carrying Marine Commandos²⁴ close to the MV Ruen, 260 nautical miles off the coast of Somalia.²⁵ There are a few notable firsts that must be underlined – the Indian Navy went public with a MARCOS operation of this nature; the first operational aerial insertion of MARCOS, and that too with visual footage and; the MARCOS employment 2,600 nautical miles from the Indian coast.



Indian Navy MARCOs bringing the 35 pirates who had taken control of MV Ruen back to India to stand trial, March 2024. | Indian Navy.

4. Pre-2023 Anti-Piracy Operations: The IN has been a critical player in anti-piracy operations even prior to the current maritime security environment in the Western Indian Ocean, ensuring the safety of crucial commercial shipping lanes. These operations are essential for maintaining global trade security and have highlighted the IN's capability to operate effectively in high-risk environments. In the immediate aftermath of 26/11, the Indian Navy set sail for its first anti-piracy deployment to the Gulf of Aden. This was to provide security cover to commercial vessels of all nationalities.²⁶

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Indian Navy's HADR and anti-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean is of strategic importance to not just India, the Indian subcontinent, the Western Indian Ocean or the Indian Ocean Region but to the entire world. The IN's active presence and operational success is crucial for regional economic stability. By countering threats like Houthi attacks, protecting and aiding transiting commercial vessels and providing HADR support, the IN contributes significantly to maintaining a secure maritime environment.

Through its various operations and proactive engagement, the IN has positioned itself as a leader in regional maritime security. This leadership role enhances India's strategic footprint and influence in the IOR to counter the growing and unwelcome maritime presence and influence of China.

IN's successful operations and collaborations have paved the way for numerous diplomatic successes. Operation Samudra Setu (sea bridge)²⁷ is one such case of medical/vaccine diplomacy. When Covid was at its peak in May 2020, the world went into travel lockdown and India was struggling, the Indian Navy's INS Jalashwa (Landing Platform Dock), Airavat, Shardul and Magar (Landing Ship Tanks) were utilised to bring her citizens back to India from across the world. Nearly 4,000 reached India's shores in this manner, with all four naval vessels sailing for nearly three months and 23,000 kilometres.²⁸ A successful evacuation operation at this scale that also involves medical challenges across the board is a more welfare- and humanitarian-focused demonstration of the Indian Navy's diverse wheelhouse of capabilities.

Ship	Date Embarked	Port of Embarkation	Number of Citizens	Date Disembarked	Port of Disembarkation
Jalashwa	8 May	Malè	698	10 May	Kochi
Magar	10 May	Malè	202	12 May	Kochi
Jalashwa	15 May	Malè	588	17 May	Kochi
Jalashwa	1 June	Colombo	686	2 June	Tuticorin
Jalashwa	5 June	Malè	700	7 June	Tuticorin
Shardul	8 June	Bandar Abbas	233	11 June	Porbandar
Airavat	20 June	Malè	198	23 June	Tuticorin
Jalashwa	25 June	Bandar Abbas	687	1 July	Tuticorin

Breakdown of the Indian Navy's Operation Samudra Setu, May-July 2020. | Indian Navy.

A comprehensive overview of the geopolitical context of the Western IOR is essential. This should highlight the strategic interests of major players like China and India, emphasising the significance of the region in global maritime security. The following policy recommendations could be considered – increasing awareness of the Indian Navy’s operations, posting Defence Attachés/Advisers (DAs) to East African states and, comparing and analysing Chinese and Indian Navy operations in the Western Indian Ocean.

1. Increasing awareness of the Indian Navy’s operations:

More awareness and therefore more information are needed on specific examples of the IN’s successful operations against piracy, HADR missions and counter-Houthi activities so that a detailed operational analysis can be made. One technique to increase awareness is continuing to share the Indian Navy’s achievements as it serves multiple positive purposes. But it is imperative to find its own balance when underlining notable incidents or missions that demonstrate the IN’s effectiveness, capabilities and economy of operation.

2. Posting Defence Attachés/Advisers to East African states:

Regarding the littoral states along the East African coast, there is a need to have sufficient intelligence pertaining to port infrastructure, the political situation and number of Indians. Posting DAs to the African states of Mozambique, Ethiopia and Ivory Coast for the first time is a positive step but must also include Yemen and Djibouti.²⁹ Madagascar does not have a DA, just a non-Armed Forces officer responsible for Defence Cooperation, among other areas.³⁰

3. Comparing and Analysing Chinese and Indian Navy Operations in the Western Indian Ocean:

The broader strategic implications of the PLAN’s and IN’s activities in

the IOR need to be discussed at the highest levels. This includes the impact of these activities on regional power dynamics, alliances and the overall maritime security architecture in the region. Based on current trends, considering the future trajectory of PLAN’s involvement in the IOR and outlining potential future roles and strategies for the IN would be beneficial. This includes maintaining and enhancing regional maritime security and adapting to evolving threats and opportunities in the region. While Indian policy should continue to focus on China, it should not focus solely on China.

Both India and China will continue with their current maritime strategies in the Western Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy’s strategy will change when it believes it has the requisite deterrence capability – in both the defensive and offensive strength – to take on China face-to-face. The Chinese Navy – on the other hand – will continue to bide its time for now – waiting, watching and learning. These lessons China is learning are perhaps being used in the South China Sea. It is only a matter of time before China is confident enough to maintain a more active presence in the Western Indian Ocean, a fair distance away from its naval supply-chains.

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Bilateral Perspectives

INDONESIA-INDIA RELATIONS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Dr. Yohanes Sulaiman



INS Airavat receives a traditional Indonesian welcome in Jakarta, August 2023. | Sea Waves Magazine.

Introduction

Indonesia and India have shared a long history of cultural, economic, and political interactions. The ties can be traced back to ancient times, with the influence of Indian culture visible in Indonesian art and historical relics such as the massive temple complexes of Borobudur and Prambanan in Central Java. In modern times, India was one of the first countries to support Indonesian independence. Later, it cooperated and supported Indonesia during the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955, which was pivotal in establishing the on-alignment movement led by both President Sukarno and Prime Minister Nehru.

Since then, both Indonesia and India have maintained good relationships

in various sectors, including defense and security cooperation. In 2001, India and Indonesia signed a defense cooperation agreement establishing the Joint Defense Cooperation Committee (JDCC). In 2018, India and Indonesia upgraded their strategic partnership to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.” In the last few years, both the Indonesian and Indian Navies have taken part in a bilateral maritime exercise known as “Samudra Shakti.” The Indonesian and Indian Armies also hold a joint exercise called “Garuda Shakti”.

Current challenges

Despite growing ties between Indonesia and India, many challenges remain: notably the lack of depth in the relationship, which leads to a lack of attention from Indonesia towards India and also from India to Indonesia, resulting in a lack of trust. It is unfortunate that despite its size and growing importance in global affairs, and its geostrategic location literally next door to Indonesia, India has received scant attention from the Indonesian elite.

This view is reflected in ISEAS' State of Southeast Asia Surveys, which have been trying to gauge the viewpoints of countries in Southeast Asia by interviewing their political, business, military, and foreign policy elites for the past six years. Among Indonesians questioned in this survey, almost all consistently think that India has almost no political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia, in contrast to China and the United States.

Table 1: In your view, which country/regional organization has the most political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia?

	India	China	United States
2024	0.00%	32.50%	23.40%
2023	0.80%	29.80%	35.50%
2022	0.80%	38.20%	35.10%
2021	0.00%	44.20%	28.70%
2020	0.00%	40.60%	32.40%
2019	0.00%	40.90%	33.00%

Source: ISEAS' State of Southeast Asia Survey
(<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>)

More than half of those surveyed have little or no confidence that India "will do the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance. Of those who have little or no confidence in India's ability, more than 40% think

that India simply does not have the capacity or political will for global leadership. For the results in 2024, more than a quarter do not believe India is a responsible or reliable power, as noted in the following two tables.

Table 2: How confident are you that India will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?

	No Confidence	Little Confidence	No Comment	Confident	Very Confident
2024	27.90%	34.30%	18.50%	17.00%	2.30%
2023	19.80%	33.90%	22.30%	21.50%	2.50%
2022	20.60%	33.60%	35.90%	9.90%	0.00%
2021	20.20%	40.30%	29.50%	10.10%	0.00%
2020	20.20%	44.60%	23.00%	11.50%	0.70%
2019	16.50%	38.30%	29.60%	13.00%	2.60%

Source: ISEAS' State of Southeast Asia Survey
(<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>)

Table 3: Among those who have no or little confidence, why do you distrust India?

	I am concerned that India is distracted with its internal and subcontinental affairs and thus cannot focus on global concerns and issues	India does not have the capacity or political will for global leadership	India's economic and military power could be used to threaten my country's interests and sovereignty	My country's political culture and worldview are incompatible with India's	I do not consider India a responsible or reliable power
2024	18.20%	40.00%	2.40%	12.70%	26.70%
2023	30.80%	44.60%	3.10%	3.10%	18.50%
2022	29.60%	40.80%	2.80%	5.60%	21.10%
2021	41.00%	48.70%	0.00%	1.30%	9.00%
2020	31.20%	46.90%	2.10%	4.20%	15.60%

Source: ISEAS' State of Southeast Asia Survey (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>)

Similarly, in Lowy Institute's Indonesia Poll 2021, which conducted a nation-wide survey to gauge regular Indonesian feelings toward other countries, the “feeling thermometer” on a scale of 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest feelings) put India at 53, similar to China's number but behind the United States' number at 60. Only 38% of Indonesians express confidence in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, behind US President Joe Biden at 44%, but higher than the confidence in China's President Xi Jinping at 34%. Only 41% of Indonesians trust India to act responsibly as a global power, a 17-point fall since 2006. In comparison, slightly more Indonesians at 42% trust China, and 56% trust the United States.

Essentially, at this point, India is not seen as a serious partner that will help maintain regional and global security. As noted in Table 1 above, India is not seen as a player in the region, with both the United States and China dominating attention.



INS Sindhukesari became the first Indian submarine to dock in Jakarta, Indonesia, in February 2023. | Twitter/@indiannavy.

Opportunities: Indonesia-India Convergence and Strategic Initiatives

Regardless of how Indonesians currently see India, there are still many opportunities for strengthening the India-Indonesia relationship. In fact, the same ISEAS State of Southeast Asia Survey also shows that

Indonesians, in general, are worried about the growing regional political and strategic influence of both China and the United States. There is a growing trend in Indonesia to look for India as a trusted third party to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry, although admittedly, the number is still far below Japan and the European Union.

Still, the fact that India's numbers are increasing while the numbers for the European Union and

Japan are stagnant means that India has room to grow, especially if India plays its cards right.

Table 4: If ASEAN were to seek out “third parties” to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry, who is your preferred and trusted strategic partner for ASEAN?

	India	Japan	European Union
2024	10.20%	34.30%	34.30%
2023	9.90%	36.40%	38.80%
2022	3.80%	31.30%	40.50%
2021	3.10%	23.30%	55.80%
2020	8.80%	37.20%	32.40%

Source: ISEAS' State of Southeast Asia Survey
(<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>)

Table 5: What is your view of China and the United States political and strategic power's influence on your country?

	I am worried about China's growing regional political and strategic influence	I welcome China's growing regional political and strategic influence	I am worried about the US' growing regional political and strategic influence	I welcome the US' growing regional political and strategic influence
2024	57.00%	43.00%	72.60%	27.40%
2023	61.10%	38.90%	67.40%	32.60%
2022	66.00%	34.00%	50.00%	50.00%
2021	86.00%	14.00%	59.50%	40.50%
2020	73.30%	26.70%	70.80%	29.20%

Source: ISEAS' State of Southeast Asia Survey (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/category/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/>)

More importantly, there are many areas for cooperation between both countries. India and Indonesia affirmed a "Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" in 2018, which promotes trade and investment cooperation, sustainable development of maritime resources, enhanced disaster risk management, increased tourism, and cultural exchanges, improved maritime security and safety, and greater collaboration in academia, science, and technology.

Economic ties between the two countries have been growing steadily, with increasing trade between the two G-20 members that possess rapidly expanding economies. Additionally, India's Act East Policy aligns with Indonesia's economic development programs, notably in Indonesia's focus on land and sea infrastructure building. This alignment opens more areas of collaboration, particularly in port development and maritime logistics.

Furthermore, as key members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-related mechanisms, the East Asia Summit (EAS) and

the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indonesia and India must work together to promote regional integration, economic cooperation, and stability in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. This cooperation enhances maritime collaboration, advancing regional governance and economic prosperity.

In addition, the interests of both countries converge on the issue of maritime security, as both share strategic locations along critical sea routes: the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait. Both countries understand that there are many challenges to be tackled – piracy, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism and the growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean through its client states, notably Pakistan, Myanmar and the Maldives.

While Indonesia may not want to directly challenge China and will not entertain the possibility of a defense alliance, India can further expand its economic and military engagement with Indonesia to build a closer relationship.

Conclusion

The India-Indonesia relationship is at a crossroads, with both challenges and opportunities ahead. By leveraging their complementary strengths and addressing common challenges, both countries can enhance their bilateral cooperation. The comprehensive strategic

partnership between India and Indonesia holds great potential for contributing to regional stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, both countries can no longer maintain the status quo. Both Indonesia and India need to understand that many of their interests converge and thus need to continue taking initiatives to strengthen their relationship.



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JAPAN-INDIA: MARITIME, SPACE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Tsuneco “Nabe” Watanabe



Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) 2024. | Press Information Bureau.

Introduction

In April 2024, President Biden invited Prime Minister Kishida to the White House as a guest of honour, and the leaders of the United States and Japan upgraded their security and technical cooperation, especially in the field of space. Among other things, the two leaders announced the shared goal of having two Japanese astronauts be the first non-Americans to land on the Moon in a future mission of the US-led international lunar exploration: the *Artemis Project*.¹ This was an upgrade of the US-Japan alliance in the Indo-Pacific for global public goods.

A year earlier, in June 2023, President Biden welcomed India's participation in the Artemis Project as Indian Prime Minister Modi also visited the White House as a state guest and agreed on security and technical cooperation in

the Indo-Pacific region between the US and India.² President Biden also visited India in September 2023 to attend the G20 Summit, where he praised the successful and historic landing of the Indian lunar probe Chandrayaan-3 on the moon and announced further cooperation in establishing a working group for commercial space cooperation between the US and India.³

Prime Minister Kishida also visited India to attend the G20 Summit and met Prime Minister Modi. He, too, conveyed his congratulations on the successful landing of the Chandrayaan-3 on the moon. The two leaders agreed to maintain and strengthen a free and open international order based on the rule of law and to work together in advanced technology areas, including space.⁴

Thus – Japan and India – as the most important partners for the United States – have shared a

strategic cooperation agenda for the stability and prosperity of the Indian Ocean region.

Common elements of the US-Japan and US-India Summit Agreements

Looking at the agreements reached at the series of summits between Japan, India and the US since 2023, there is a clear common thread. The momentum is to promote maritime security cooperation and technological development in the space sector and other areas as public goods for stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. It shows the potential for Japan and India to play a growing role in the future in the areas of maritime and coastal security in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, in space cooperation and maritime situation awareness from space.

At the Quad Summit in May 2022, Japan, India, the US and Australia agreed to work together to create a monitoring and sustainable development framework based on maritime observation from space and launched the “Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Situation Awareness” and the “Japan-US-Australia-India HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) Partnership in the Indo-Pacific”.⁵

These agreements among Japan, India, the US and Australia demonstrate a willingness to work together to shape the public goods for stability in the Indo-Pacific region. An important foundation for this is both traditional and non-traditional security, which would be fundamental to regional and global economic prosperity. Above all, technical cooperation is a key element in ensuring the goal. Consequently, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) members have been following up on the agreement.

Importantly, these policies are closely linked not only to the formation of public goods but also to the vital national interests of each of the Quad countries. For them, mutual cooperation in the framework of the Quad is a win-win situation where steady progress is being made. The former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed the Quad Strategic Dialogue in 2006 but the time was not yet ripe for the Quad to be formally launched.

However, looking at the steady progress that has been made since then, it can be said that the Quad was an excellent idea that focused on the national interests and strategic commonalities of each of all at an early stage. Indeed, the Abe vision at the time provided the incentive for Japan to move forward with its subsequent policies.

As early as 2012, Prime Minister Abe, in a contribution to the web journal Project Syndicate, made it clear that Japan’s national interest lies in the freedom of navigation in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and that this is also an interest shared by India, the United States and Australia:

Peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. Japan, as one of the oldest sea-faring democracies in Asia, should play a greater role alongside Australia, India, and the US *-in preserving the common good in both regions.*⁶

Japan is poor in natural resources, especially fossil and nuclear fuels, which it imports daily through the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) passing through the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, East China Sea and Pacific Ocean. Japan also secures the funds to import them by exporting industrial products such as automobiles through the same SLOCs. In other words, SLOCs are literally the lifeline which guarantees Japan's survival and prosperity.

One of the major challenges in defending these SLOCs is China's territorial claims in the East and South China Seas that deviate from international law with its military build-up,

including sea, air, land, space and deployment of law enforcement forces to establish its claims.⁷ China simultaneously also imports resources and exports products through these very SLOCs Japan uses, and one of the motivations for its expansionary stance in the East and South China Seas is the defensive aspect of securing its own SLOCs.⁸ For China the Indian Ocean which forms its SLOCs, is a vital region for its own survival and prosperity, and it has been making strategic moves by increasing its economic influence over Indian Ocean littoral states such as Bangladesh, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.⁹

Japan's National Security Strategy, released in December 2022, presents the following recognitions and policies:

As a maritime nation surrounded by the sea on all sides and blessed with one of the world's most extensive jurisdictional waters, Japan will work with its ally, like-minded countries, and others to promote efforts to ensure the freedoms of navigation and overflight and to ensure safety, as well as maintain and develop the international maritime order based on universal values, including the rule of law. Specifically, Japan will advance multilateral maritime security cooperation by enhancing maritime surveillance to respond to threats in sea lanes, active bilateral drills and exercises with other countries, and overseas port calls.¹⁰

Background of Japan's Historic Policy Shift

The maritime surveillance indicated in the National Security Strategy of Japan requires strengthening satellite capability in the space domain. Thus, it states that Japan will promote measures to utilise Japan's overall space-related capabilities in the security field, including strengthening cooperation between the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and other organisations and the Self-Defense Forces.

In fact, this policy represents a historic policy shift for Japan. Until now, Japanese academia, which has been strongly influenced by leftist pacifism due to its defeat in World War II, has placed severe restrictions on the military use of space.¹¹ In recent years, however, Japan has

made a fairly remarkable policy shift.¹²

Until this policy change, there had been an ongoing dialogue between Japanese academia and the government.¹³ On 25 September 2023, the Science Council of Japan representing general academia's interests, published its views on research into dual-use technologies, recognising that it would not impose any restriction on the dual-use technology since it is difficult to clearly separate military and civilian research. This is believed to have resulted in a certain level of political consensus in the space sector to promote the use of space for security purposes.

The field of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) using space technology in the Indian or Pacific Ocean is an area where military and civilian, as well as traditional and non-traditional security, cannot be clearly separated. Japan has taken a step forward in space cooperation and maritime situational awareness with the US and India by gaining some consensus from domestic academia to work with security-related technological developments. This can be attributed to the fact that even sceptical Japanese academics could not back away from international cooperation in the MDA, which contributes greatly to the safety of civilian ship and aircraft operations, and in which dual-use technology can make a contribution.

The Japanese government's National Security Strategy has the following recognition and policy regarding dual-use technology.

Cutting-edge science and technology are advancing at an accelerated pace, and it has become extremely difficult in practice to distinguish between technologies for civilian. Against this backdrop, in order to widely and actively utilize Japan's advanced technological capabilities in the public and private sectors for security purposes, Japan will strengthen the system to improve technological capabilities of the public and private sectors that can be used for security purposes, to utilize, in a whole-of-government manner, funds and information related to research and development.¹⁴

In fact, the framework that became the prototype for the Quad cooperation was pioneered when

Japan, India, the United States and Australia formed an ad hoc core group and led the international community's assistance in the wake of the December 2004 Sumatra earthquake and Indian Ocean tsunami disaster.¹⁵

In this regard, cooperation between Japan, India and volunteer countries in the non-traditional security area of HADR continues to be an important area, with MDA being the most useful information infrastructure for disaster prevention and rescue activities.

Challenge 1 – How to rein in Chinese behaviour Shift

Needless to say, MDA is of vital importance in the realm of traditional security as well. The Quad leaders welcomed the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) in the 2022 summit.¹⁶ The IPMDA is designed to enable a near-real-time, integrated and cost-effective maritime domain awareness picture to aid the involved nations to monitor the waters and shores in the increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region.¹⁷

Even when the US military shot down a Chinese reconnaissance balloon flying over US mainland airspace in 2023, a senior US Department of Defense official pointed out the significance of international information sharing through the IPMD as a future counter-intelligence purpose at a US think-tank seminar.¹⁸

In addition, it is indisputable that the IPMD is an important element of Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Targeting (ISR&T) in military operations. Equally the IPMDA is critically important in dealing with the grey -zone challenges, which is the boundary between peacetime and wartime are not clear and could escalate to the military conflict. Images provided by the IPMDA could be useful information to

ensure that a gray-zone situation does not escalate.

In the Indo-Pacific region, China is increasingly using gray-zone tactics against the existing international order. The perception of experts at Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) is given below, but this perception is also shared by experts in India and the US:

China has attempted to change the status quo through low-intensity conflicts in the maritime domain. In order to avoid war and create a favorable posture, China uses the PLA Navy as a deterrent force, while at the same time utilizing the China Coast Guard (CCG) law enforcement agency and the maritime militia to manage the intensity of the dispute so that it does not lead to armed conflict and exacerbate the conflict thereby gradually expanding China's rights and interests.¹⁹

On the other hand, if there is one perception that China shares with Japan, India, the US and Australia and India, it is that China does not want to clash with the US and its allies in a large-scale war. It is obvious that if the US and China were to engage in a military conflict, the losses to the countries involved would be unimaginable. However, there is no indication that China will stop its current expansionary posture or gray-zone challenge. We should assume that “the Chinese leadership seeks to create gray-zone situations constantly and exert pressure on the opponent while avoiding military clashes with other countries.”²⁰

Eventually, what Japan and India could do is to engage the US in the region to maintain a military balance with China for deterrence, as well as to continuously monitor the situation to prevent gray-zone tactics by China or to manage escalation of their gray-zone challenge. The ultimate policy goal would be to make China realize that gray-zone challenges are an operation not worth the cost.

Challenge 2 – Solidarity with Indian Ocean littoral states and South Asian countries

China's use of influence through the so-called 'debt trap' policy of economic aid and economic coercion measures such as a tactical export restriction of critical minerals and other goods are also challenges to the existing order. In this regard, coordination of economic cooperation to the countries concerned, including capacity-building assistance in MDA or coastal security in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and, the South China and East Seas, is an important agenda for both Japan and India.

In the South China Sea for example, China has strengthened its claim to the Second Thomas Shoal against the Philippines and CCG vessels have been exerting pressure on Philippine vessels in the surrounding waters.²¹ In April 2024, the first trilateral summit meeting between Japan, the US, and the Philippines was held in conjunction

with the Japan-US summit meeting. Japan confirmed progress in cooperation, including negotiations towards an early conclusion of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), the provision of coastal surveillance radars to the Philippines through the government's newly created Official Security Assistance (OSA) and the provision of additional patrol vessels through Official Development Assistance (ODA).²²

In the September 2023 Joint Statement of India-Japan leaders in which they agreed to concretize future cooperation in the field of defense equipment and technology, Prime Minister Kishida welcomed Prime Minister Modi's 2019 announcement of the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), and expressed his hope that the IPOI and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) would be integrated, recognizing the growing scope for cooperation between the two countries, and expressing hope that Japan and India will seek to expand cooperation to other countries in recognition of the progress of ongoing projects in Bangladesh.²³



India and Japan sign the summit-level Joint Statement Partnership for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Post-COVID World, September 2023. | pmindia.gov.in

In fact, Japan has been cooperating with the Indian Ocean littoral states such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. On 12 March 2024, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the start of negotiations for a bilateral Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the Bangladeshi government. With Bangladesh scheduled to graduate from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) in November 2026, expectations for the bilateral EPA are high in both countries. The two governments launched a Joint Study on Bangladesh EPA in 2022-2023, and after a total of three study sessions, the two governments have reached this decision.²⁴

On 4 May 2024, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa visited Sri Lanka and stated, "Sri Lanka is an important partner situated in a strategic location on the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and Japan would like to actively work with Sri Lanka, the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), in order to achieve inclusive growth for the entire Indo-Pacific region." She also stated that "Japan has decided to offer a vessel equipped with a sonar to be used for compiling maritime charts."²⁵

On 27 April 2024, Foreign Minister Kamikawa visited Madagascar, where she said that Madagascar, located at a strategic point between the Indian Ocean and the east coast of Africa, is an important partner in promoting the FOIP and that Japan supports the Thomasina port to enhance maritime connectivity. She conveyed Japan's commitment to the multifaceted development of Madagascar.²⁶

Conclusion

Thus, Japan and India are strengthening their partnership with the United States, a technologically and militarily advanced nation, in an effort to jointly create public goods for regional stability and prosperity. The top priority for this purpose is to maintain the regional security and

order. Japan and India are advancing MDA with Space technology through technical cooperation in the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific Ocean. For Japan and India, technical and security cooperation in space with the U.S. would provide public goods to the region and at the same time, a kit for their own growth and prosperity.

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RUSSIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: FROM POWER PROJECTION TO CLASSICAL 'MAHANISM'

Dr. Alexey Kupriyanov



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Sudan's Acting Foreign Minister, Ali al-Sadiq, hold a joint news conference at the airport in Khartoum, February 2023. | Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. | Agence France-Presse.

Introduction

The shores of Russia are washed by three oceans but the Indian is not among them. Historically, Russia expanded north and east, sometimes west but its path to the south was blocked by the Pamir, Hindu Kush and Caucasus Mountains and the ancient civilizations that lay beyond them.

This does not mean that Russia did not strive south. Peter the Great organized several land expeditions to explore the passage to India and was going to send a maritime expedition to the Indian Ocean to reach an agreement with Madagascar's pirates.

But Peter's death put an end to his projects. Russian warships appeared in the region only in the 19th Century, after Napoleon's defeat. These expeditions were mainly scientific in nature but a

few decades later the Great Game began, and strategists in St. Petersburg began to think about creating a cruising squadron to destroy British trade in the Indian Ocean. These plans remained on paper.

Russia's return to the Indian Ocean occurred in the second half of the 20th Century after the actual collapse of the British Empire and the beginning of the Cold War. A Soviet squadron was constantly on duty in the Indian Ocean but this region remained a secondary theater of operations: the USSR and the USA often solved the same problems there and acted together in a strategic

sense, ensuring the safety of navigation, the fight against pirates, and mine-sweeping after armed conflicts.

After the end of the Cold War, Russia withdrew from the Indian Ocean. The Russian fishing fleet was privatized, partially sold off or scrapped. The same happened with the merchant navy. The new Russia has economically turned into a resource colony of the West. The new Russian leadership sharply reduced its geopolitical ambitions; the Indian Ocean was no longer included in them.

Russia's Happy Return

In the 2000s, Russia began to look with renewed interest towards the Indian Ocean. This view was initially geopolitical: it was believed that Russia needed to increase its profile on a global scale in order to be taken into account and could maintain its status as a great power. This request existed both at the level of politicians and among people dissatisfied with the consequences of the collapse of the USSR. At the same time, the state of the economy and Armed Forces did not allow Russia to waste resources. It was necessary to justify the need for this decision for Russia to return to the Indian Ocean.

The catalyst was the campaign in Syria. Russian forces – initially extremely small – gradually increased in size and the scope of their actions expanded. This, in turn, required a permanent Russian presence in the Red Sea to cover the southern flank of Russian operations. Russia simultaneously participated in protecting shipping from Somali pirates. It did this mainly for status reasons, to demonstrate its role as a responsible great power.

Objectively, the presence of pirates rather helped the development of the Russian economy, since problems with shipping in the Red Sea increased the attractiveness of transit by land or through the Arctic seas.

These actions gave rise to the idea of creating a Russian base in the Indian Ocean. The most logical place seemed to be the Red Sea. For a number of foreign policy reasons, Sudan was chosen as a partner country, and Russia signed an agreement with it to create a logistics support point in Flamingo Bay.

This location had a number of advantages (for example, the infrastructure and proximity to Suez) and a great disadvantage: the Sudanese regime turned out to be quite unstable. The Russian base fell victim to endless squabbles between politicians who wanted, on the one hand – to get more money from Russia while on the other – not to quarrel with the Americans –relations with whom seem to have begun to normalize.

The proposed naval base was supposed to provide cover for the southern flank of the Russian operation in Syria and at the same time perform a status function, demonstrating that Russia planned to project power in warm seas. This was a clear departure from classical Mahanian concepts and meant playing with the more subtle points of the new Cold War: a conflict that did not involve the actual use of force but rather a balancing of mutual threats and an existential hybridity that linked the projection of military power to political and economic interests.

Torturous negotiations with Sudanese elites were interrupted with the start of a special Russian military operation in Ukraine. The focus of Russian politicians and military personnel has shifted to Ukraine and the Black Sea, and the Indian Ocean has dropped from the list of possible priority areas.

U-turn to Mahan

Recently, however, Russia's interest in the Indian Ocean Region has grown radically. Until the start of the operation in Ukraine, European countries remained Russia's key partners in the purchase of its energy resources and the supply of various industrial goods. In 2021, the EU accounted for 77.3% of all Russian gas exports, 46.3% of oil,

52.4% of petroleum products, 20.5% of coal, 35.9% of all imports of goods.

In addition, Russia hoped to become a land bridge on the route from China to Europe, creating an alternative to the route through the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal. But the introduction of Western sanctions forced Russia to redirect its trade flows. China and India became Russia's key trading partners, and trade with the latter – due to the lack of a land route – could only be conducted through the Indian Ocean. This created a number of difficulties.

Firstly, there are security problems. Immediately after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, a number of Russian ships were detained in European waters without legal grounds. This calls into question the safety of Russian shipping in the Indian Ocean, given that European warships regularly patrol the Horn of Africa.

In addition, the threat from Somali pirates and the possibility of an attack by the Houthis remain. Although Russian ships have rarely been targeted so far, this is not ruled out in the future. In the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy will be able to provide protection to Russian ships, but there is no guarantee that they will be able to do this in the Gulf of Aden.

Secondly, anti-Russian sanctions create problems when Russian ships enter the ports of India and other countries in the region. It is worth remembering the episode with the tug *Ursa Major*: it was denied entry into the Bangladeshi ports of Chittagong and Haldia. Although there has been no news of new such denials since then, there is still a possibility that if sanctions are tightened, this problem will re-emerge.

Finally, Russia is now implementing a large-scale program to restore its fishing potential by building numerous seiners and trawlers. This means that Russian fishing fleets are likely to

appear in the Indian Ocean, where they will also need protection.

Possible Solutions

The first and third problems cannot be fully resolved until the end of the Ukrainian conflict. The Russian military industry now works primarily for the frontline. Therefore, it will be unable to fully ensure Russia's full-scale presence in the Indian Ocean. However, this presence will remain limited as Russian shipyards continue to operate and ships remain on active duty.

We can expect either a resolution of the situation around Flamingo Bay in Sudan or a transfer of the Russian naval base to another location. Eritrea looks most promising: military facilities have been preserved in the port of Massawa, the government is ready to cooperate with Russia and appears more stable than in Sudan.



Russian Navy frigate RFS Admiral Grigorovich (494), anchored in Port Sudan, February 2021. | Agence France-Presse.

In addition, there will be increased bilateral interaction, including naval exercises, between Russia and countries whose ships are present in the region (excluding unfriendly ones). After the end of the Ukrainian conflict, however, Russia will have to decide to what extent it is willing to increase its presence in the region.

If this presence is full-scale, then, given the friendly relations between Moscow and New Delhi, it will mean that Russia will be able to help India fill the power vacuum that exists in the Western Indian Ocean off the East African coast. It will be able to take on some of the tasks of combating pirates, drug traffickers and smugglers, making it unnecessary for the countries of the region to turn to Western countries and China.

The second problem can be solved by investing in the development of regional ports and building infrastructure there. If Russian ships use terminals operated by Russia-India joint ventures, it will ease concerns about sanctions. How intensive the investment process will be in the

coming year will determine its continuation after the end of the conflict, when for Russia it will turn from a necessary and urgent measure into a commercial project.

Conclusion

It can be said that only after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine did Russian politicians understand why they needed the Indian Ocean. Abstract considerations about the projection of power are discarded, Russia's new approach to the region is absolutely Mahanian: the safety of navigation in the Indian Ocean is needed in order to support the economy and feed the people.

The status reason turned into an existential one.

The main question now is how firmly Russia will gain an economic foothold in the region because this will determine how many resources it will be willing to devote to being present in the Indian Ocean after the end of the conflict, and in what form this presence will take place.



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FROM STRATEGY TO SECURITY – SEYCHELLES AND INDIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Diana Benoit



INS Sunayna makes a port call in Seychelles for her long-range deployment in the South West Indian Ocean Region to maintain security and growth for all in the region, June 2024. | Indian Ministry of Defence.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region holds an extremely important position strategically because of the large sea-lanes that serve global trade. It is an extensive marine expanse from eastern Africa to western Australia that contains critical energy supplies and commercial flows, bringing the major economies of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East into contact with Europe and the Americas. Security and stability become crucial for the strategic importance of the region as do its vulnerabilities and territorial disputes.

Maritime security and safety in the Indian Ocean provide for safe passage with respect to the freeway of trade and stability in the region. However, the high rate of piracy, illegal fishing, and the significant magnitude of smuggling, along with the threats imposed on maritime

activity, calls for the highest level of security. Besides, the security landscape is complicated by environmental hazards, including oil spills and pollution of the marine environment, further giving importance due to the need for comprehensive maritime governance for the same purpose.

Seychelles and India are two important geopolitical actors placed in the Indian Ocean. Seychelles, on the other hand, is an archipelago in the Western Indian Ocean where significant maritime communication routes pass through, which therefore has vital interests in maritime security. The economy of Seychelles relies heavily on the rich maritime resources of fisheries and tourism as it has a large exclusive economic zone. India is a significant maritime power, owing to its long coastline and strong naval forces.

Seychelles and India: Strategic Partners

The rich history of relations and diplomacy between Seychelles and India, therefore, provides a firm foundation for the two countries to cooperate on various fronts, including marine security. Today, the robust strategic partnership between Seychelles and India draws strength from the past, mutual interests, and the growing importance of geopolitics. Relations between the two countries have developed over decades, marked by cooperation in various key areas, with a primary focus on maritime security. Bilateral relations between Seychelles and India date back to 1976 when Seychelles gained its independence. The level of closeness in the Seychelles-India relationship has been further marked by high-level visits, cooperation at the economic level, and cultural exchanges.

Opportunities for Enhanced Cooperation

The strategic partnership that has taken place between Seychelles and India can provide immense avenues and opportunities for the two nations to further cooperate in matters of maritime safety and security. It is through the combined integration of distinctive strengths and resources that both countries can further help the creation of regional stability and prosperity.

These include:

1. Regular joint naval exercises and coordinated patrols to further enhance mutual compatibility between the two navies and facilitate the exchange of best practices associated with operating procedures in the development of common operational protocols.
2. Joint maritime information sharing centres, which exchange intelligence relevant to vessel movements, potential security challenges, and environmental threats. This is very beneficial in increasing situational awareness and maritime domain awareness.

3. Indian naval academies and maritime training institutes have specialised courses to offer the Seychellois personnel in areas such as maritime law enforcement, search and rescue operations, and protection of the environment.
4. Joint environmental and disaster response initiatives between India and Seychelles to maintain marine health and improve crisis management. Coordinated disaster response exercises and early warning mechanisms are crucial for effective preparedness and action.

Timely collaboration between the two in the raising of security issues will help both in overcoming common challenges for the enhancement of regional stability and development.



Exercise Cutlass Express at Port Victoria, Seychelles, March 2024. | Indian Ministry of Defence.

Obstacles to effective cooperation

Equally important would be arising challenges and hence can be detrimental to the effectiveness and sustainability of such efforts. Accordingly, these challenges need to be mitigated as and when they emerge for building on the full potential of this strategic partnership.

Political and diplomatic challenges can change the dynamics of bilateral cooperation. For example, the change in the political leadership or foreign policy priorities in either of the countries may affect the continuity and the effectiveness of the mutually agreed cooperative agenda. For example, political complications within the country or international diplomatic frictions may lead to delays or even cancellations of agreed projects and activities. The continuity and strengthening of political will from both political institutions enables the sustained pace of bilateral collaborative initiatives.

Issues of resource constraints and limitations to capacities for joint initiatives is similar for both Seychelles and India. While India is capable of dealing with maritime

issues arising from several other aspects, it needs to balance resource allocation and the attention given to more than one front, considering its extended neighbourhood and domestic needs. On the other hand, with a smaller economy and limited defence budget, Seychelles might face challenges in sustaining operations in maritime security and infrastructure development within this sector.

More importantly, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a zone of complex regional dynamics, hosting multiple external powers whose strategic interests will complicate overtly any signs of displayed bilateral cooperation. Their involvement, which has major rivalries like China and the United States, is likely to bring some tough competition on board and foster mistrust. The way forward in these regional rivalries and the careful management of external influences require adept diplomacy and strategic foresight.

Future Prospects and Recommendations

The cooperation between Seychelles and India in enhancing maritime safety and security can be said to have a bright future, provided both nations are able to navigate through the challenges strategically and leverage the innate opportunities for deepened levels of engagement.

The emphasis of this is that it makes it necessary for there to be a formal, high-level dialogue and consultations on mechanisms of sustained engagement and timely responses to emerging challenges. This is not taking place by government officials alone and would have to involve representations by the Navy, the Coast Guard, and other relevant actors. The formulation of strategies makes it easier to coordinate and align priorities.

The involvement of the private sector in infrastructure and maritime security brings additional investment, innovation, and expertise. Developing ports, enhancing surveillance capabilities, and promoting eco-friendly maritime practices are some of the areas in which public-private partnerships can be extremely instrumental. Encouraging private sector participation can complement governmental efforts and drive sustainable growth.

Cooperation in research related to monitoring and interventions of environmental threats, such as climate change and marine pollution, results in several benefits. In addition, the formulation of joint research centres or programmes aids in the sharing of knowledge and resources. Furthermore, research initiatives focused on peace and security within the region can enhance mutual understanding and develop comprehensive strategies to address common threats, thereby strengthening the overall security architecture in the IOR.

The implementation of these recommendations will help enhance mutual maritime cooperation

between Seychelles and India and contributes to regional stability and security. Efforts will be undertaken towards addressing common threats and opening new opportunities between both nations for increased economic growth and sustainable development in the IOR.

Conclusion

Indeed, the future of the partnership between Seychelles and India in the Indian Ocean seems very promising. Capitalising on historical relations and common interests, and identifying fresh areas of collaboration will pave the way for both nations to work closely together in the larger interest of regional stability, security, and prosperity. Such higher coordination not only addresses common maritime threats but also opens new avenues for growth and development for labour and sustainability within the Indian Ocean Region.



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THE UMBILICAL CORD CONNECTING SRI LANKA AND INDIA

Bernard Goonetilleke



The Umbilical Cord Connecting Sri Lanka And India

Ram Sethu / The Adam's Bridge

Following the visit of a presidential team of officers to New Delhi in late March 2024, the subject of land connectivity between Sri Lanka and India was discussed professing that a proposal would be handed over to President Wickremesinghe in the following month.

Sri Lanka-India land connectivity has a long history. The ancient Sri Lankan chronicle Mahāvamsa provides a stirring account of how Vijaya, a prince from North India, arrived in Sri Lanka around 543 BCE by ship, landed at a location close to Mannar on the northwestern

coast of the island and established a kingdom which lasted over two millennia. Years later, King Devanampiyatissa (247-207 BCE), a descendant of Vijaya, embraced Buddhism after an encounter with Arahant Mahinda, son of Emperor Ashoka.

That relationship, founded over two millennia ago, played an important role in shaping the political, cultural and religious links between numerous kingdoms of the sub-continent and 'Lanka', as the country was known then. According to the literature available in both countries, the interaction between the two countries flourished over the succeeding centuries, thanks to the regular movement of ships from several ports on the eastern and

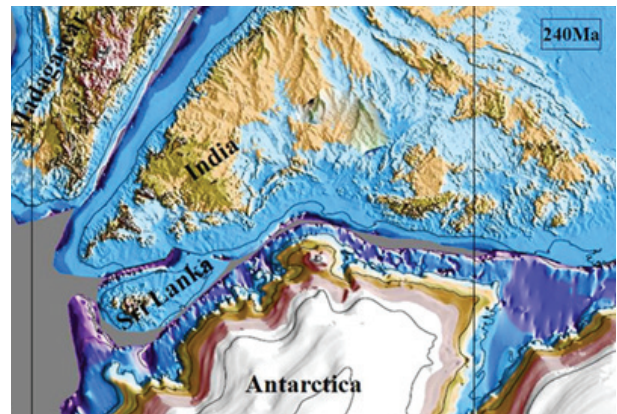
western coasts of the subcontinent. During the intervening period, Indian influence spread across the Indian Ocean, particularly towards Southeast Asia, via the Bay of Bengal.

Despite the role played by sizable waves of migrants from various parts of the subcontinent at different times since time immemorial, Sri Lanka took pride in maintaining that the island had always been an independent country since the advent of Prince Vijaya until the political power of the entire country was taken over by the British in 1815 AD.

The Making of the Indian Ocean and Connectivity during the Pre-historic Period

Sri Lankans do not seem familiar with the unique geological relationship Sri Lanka shared with the neighbouring subcontinent during pre-historic times. Millions of years ago, Madagascar, India, Sri Lanka, and Antarctica formed part of the eastern portion of the supercontinent known as Gondwana. Around 140 Ma (Ma= 1 million years) ago, the eastern part of Gondwana began to drift away from the supercontinent, and the Antarctic Plate began to separate from the Indian plate. By 120 Ma, Sri Lanka and India had become integral parts of a single tectonic plate and drifted northward; in this process, Sri Lanka moved anti-clockwise, creating the Gulf of Mannar, while Antarctica moved southward.

Thus, the Indian Ocean basin was created some 80 million years ago while taking the present configuration about 30 million years ago. If not for this propitious tectonic activity, instead of becoming a tropical island attached to the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka would have ended up in the eternal embrace of frigid Antarctica! Before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century, the Indian Ocean was known as the 'Eastern Ocean' and 'Great Oriental Ocean' to the Greeks and Romans respectively. In contrast, in ancient Sanskrit literature, it was known as 'Ratnakara'.



The Paleo-fit reconstruction of India, Sri Lanka and Antarctica (at ca. 240 Ma) in the Gondwana supercontinent. | Journal of Geophysical Research: Solid Earth

While maritime connectivity had been the norm during the historical period, there have been references to land connectivity linking the Pamban island (India) with Talaimannar (Sri Lanka) in the Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Ramayana, in particular, relates to constructing the 'Ram Sethu', connecting the narrow sea strip enabling Prince Rama to reach Lanka. The 'Ram Sethu', renamed 'Adam's Bridge' by the Europeans, is a 48-km-long chain of limestone shoals that had been the land bridge connecting the two countries. According to the records of Rameswaram Temple, the bridge had been passable on foot up to the 15th century until a cyclone destroyed it in 1480 AD.

Land Connectivity during Historic Times

With both Sri Lanka and India coming under the administration of the British, and with the growth of plantation economies in both countries, there was much clamour for physically connecting the two countries to facilitate the free movement of the labour force and trading activities. The steamer service between Tuticorin and Colombo that commenced in the late 19th century was considered a tedious mode of transport as the rail journey took 22 hours from then Madras to Tuticorin and the ferry connection to Colombo another 24 hours, which failed to meet the expectations of British economic interests in both countries.

Against this backdrop, the British had planned, as early as the 1870s, to build a bridge over the Palk Strait, connecting the Pamban and Mannar islands, thereby providing a continuous rail link between the two countries. After conducting a feasibility study, a project proposal was presented to the British Parliament to connect Dhanushkodi with Talaimannar at an estimated cost of around INR 300 lakhs. The project was turned down presumably due to the high price and INR 70 lakhs was approved to build a bridge connecting Mandapam with the Pamban island. The bridge design was entrusted to an American engineer, William Scherzer, and the construction was completed in 1913. The ferry service connecting Dhanushkodi with Talaimannar was inaugurated on February 24, 1914, in the presence of John Sinclair, Governor of Madras and Robert Chalmers, Governor of Ceylon.

Reporting on the historic achievement, the Boston Evening Transcript on April 4, 1914, reported: “The question of carrying a railway over the reef, which consists of corals and sandbanks, intersected by small channels, was considered by the two competent engineers, one for the Indian and one for the Ceylon Government, and both have decided that the undertaking is quite feasible”. However, in addition to the high cost, the commencement of World War I in July 1914 may have prevented the dream from becoming a reality. If not for this development, linking the two railways and the two countries, which shared a common heritage, would have become a reality a century ago, eliminating the present-day debate over the issue.

Reaction to the Proposed Road Connectivity

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe first broached the proposal for road connectivity between Sri Lanka and India during his meeting with the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in June 2002. However, that was when the separatist conflict was raging in Sri Lanka, which also adversely impacted southern India. Chief Minister Jayalalitha opposed any connectivity project, including recommencing of the ferry service that had been halted in the 1980s

due to the security environment in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, citing possible Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) threats to the state of Tamil Nadu.

Likewise, there were objections from the Sri Lankan side as well, with the changing administrations in the island nation. While the 2002 proposal died a natural death, in a meeting with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe in September 2015, Indian Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari discussed constructing a sea bridge and an underwater tunnel with the support of the Asian Development Bank. However, changing priorities and governments in both countries dampened the enthusiasm for the project once again.

Eight years later, on 21 July 2023, following the meeting between President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a communique was issued that gave high priority to multi-faceted connectivity arrangements between the two countries, including land connectivity designed to develop access to the ports of Trincomalee and Colombo. How far this newfound enthusiasm would go is to be seen with elections over the horizons of India and Sri Lanka.



Ram Sethu / The Adam's Bridge | Bernard Goonetilleke/Google Earth

Option	Start (Take-off) point	End (Merging) point	Length
1	7.25 km before Arichal Munai (Dhanushkodi)	Near Talaimannar Old Light House	43 km
2	7.20 km before Arichal Munai (Dhanushkodi)	Medawachchiya-Tailaimannar Highway	40 km
3	2.00 km before Arichal Munai (Dhanushkodi)	Medawachchiya-Tailaimannar Highway Junction	34 Km
4	2.00 km before Arichal Munai (Dhanushkodi)	Medawachchiya-Tailaimannar Highway	39 Km
5	6.50 km before Arichal Munai (Dhanushkodi)	Medawachchiya-Tailaimannar Highway	44 Km
6	6.60 km before Arichal Munai (Dhanushkodi)	Nadukadai Road	52 Km

The Rationale for Increased Connectivity

Once operationalized, the bridge project will facilitate rapid transportation between the two countries by road and rail. The two terminal points of the proposed road are Colombo and Trincomalee, both having major deep-water ports strategically located to connect the markets in the east and the west. Sri Lanka has a widespread network of roads and railways. However, they require major upgrades to connect the Bay of Bengal with the Arabian Sea.

Colombo is accessible by rail from Mannar via the coast and the main line across the island's

centre. If the coastal railway line currently terminating at Periyanaagavillu in the North Central Province (NCP) is extended northwards, Colombo Port could be reached from Mannar much faster than through the existing main railway line.

Similarly, if a new railway line is laid from Medawachchiya (NCP) to Trincomalee, the distance between Mannar and the Trincomalee Port will be much shorter.

Likewise, if the existing railway line between Trincomalee and Colombo is upgraded to carry high-speed freight trains with a new section between Kurunegala and the Galoya Junction in the NCP, it will facilitate the rapid movement of

cargo between Trincomalee and Colombo ports, and obviate the need for cargo ships to sail from the east coast of India to the Port of Colombo for transshipment facilities.

Meanwhile, of the potential 30,000 MW of renewable energy available in the Mannar and Pooneryn areas, the ongoing 500 MW renewable power project and the proposed grid connectivity between the two countries will facilitate electrification of the railway network of the island, making rail transportation cheap, swift, and an environmentally sound proposition.

The Indian economy is predicted to grow at a rate higher than 6 per cent per annum during the next several years, while the Asian Development Bank has projected that Sri Lanka would grow at a snail's pace of 1.9 per cent in 2024 and 2.5 per cent in 2025, following two years of consecutive contractions in 2022 (7.3 %) and 2023 (2.3%). Such growth is wholly inadequate for Sri Lanka to meet its debt servicing commitments, both local and foreign, as well as the country's development needs. Unless Sri Lanka increases its income through exports at a heightened level and makes the country attractive for foreign investment, it has been predicted that the Sri Lankan economy will crash again, leading to political and social turmoil, which could be much worse than the experience in 2022.

Fortunately, that disaster was averted by India's generous and unprecedented financial support. Against such a bleak scenario, the country must think outside the box and act expeditiously to avoid a recurrence of the 2022 experience. One school of thought believes that Sri Lanka will succeed in turning its economy around if it were to be linked with India's fast-growing economy, which is predicted to be the third largest global economy by 2027.

Addressing the Fear Factor

However, the proposed road and rail connectivity with India is easier said than done, with manifold obstacles obstructing the forward movement. Similarly, the proposals for linking the Sri Lankan economy to that of India have generated

opposing views, which questions the wisdom of the proposed grid and oil pipeline connections with India, the development of the Trincomalee oil tank farm, among others. This requires a study of the underlying reasons and needs to be addressed sagaciously.

The island mentality of the people, which once hindered the building of the channel tunnel connecting England with Europe in the 1970s, needs to be understood and addressed. More ominous are the historical and modern-day experiences relating to Sri Lanka-India relations that are deeply etched into the collective memory of Sri Lankans across generations.

Historical experiences aside, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is seen by the populace of both countries in two different shades. The majority of Indians perceived the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord as a sacrifice made by India to safeguard the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, while Sri Lankans saw it as an imposition of an unequal treaty to serve Indian interests, which resulted in a violent response against the Sri Lankan state and Indian interests by a radical left-wing party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), in the late 1980s.

The reaction towards other Indian projects currently under negotiation seems to be based on the fear factor entertained by some Sri Lankans, who come forth with 'what if' questions. One such question is, what if India decides to switch off the grid connection or the oil pipeline to exert pressure on Sri Lanka? Either the proponents of such views are unaware or choose to ignore that electricity generated in Nepal is sold in Bangladesh via transmission lines going across the Indian territory.

And the proposed grid connectivity between India and distant countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Singapore via undersea cables, will be a reality in the

not-so-distant future.

There are other concerns entertained by those who believe too much dependence on India will threaten the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Sri Lanka.

Other concerns that need to be addressed include environmental issues resulting from the proposed road and rail connectivity and the development of renewable power generation projects with counterclaims by the affected investor.

Meanwhile, others charge that the relationship between the two countries is transactional and favours India; that Colombo is pressurized by New Delhi to make concessions without following established procedures, citing the Colombo Port and renewable energy projects.

Transforming Negatives into Positives

Such charges by certain quarters may sound disheartening and disconcerting when Sri Lanka is trying to recover from a severe economic downturn, particularly when there is a promise of recovery with India's help. One way to

overcome the situation is to discuss major irritants in open forums so that such issues are adequately addressed rather than allowing them to simmer.

The Sri Lankan Government should act openly and transparently when international players are chosen to undertake significant projects. Due consideration should be given to safeguarding the environment. Where necessary, space should be provided for public consultations, where issues of concern could be raised and contentious matters sorted out. Meanwhile, India should take precautions to ensure proper procedures are followed when projects are negotiated. All transactions should be above board without leaving room for reopening later in response to public protests or agitation. Following proper procedures and treading cautiously on sensitive issues could help bring major projects to fruition that would serve both countries.

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Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke

Bernard Goonetilleke joined the Sri Lanka Foreign Service in 1970 and served Sri Lanka through diplomatic missions in Kuala Lumpur, New York, Bangkok, Washington D.C., Geneva and Beijing. He served as Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2003-2004. He was appointed Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the UN in Geneva (1992-1997), and later Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the People's Republic of China (2000-2003). He also served as Acting Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the UN in New York (2004-2005) and ended his diplomatic career as Ambassador to the United States of America (2005-2008).

Following his retirement in 2008, he was appointed Chairman of the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM) and later Chairman of Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), with positions he held concurrently from 2008 to 2010. Since May 2010, he functions as Chairman, Pathfinder Foundation.

MARITIME CONTESTATION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Dr. Amaia Sanchez-Cacicedo



Indian, Australian, Japanese and US Navy assets during Exercise Malabar, August 2023. | Press Information Bureau.

Introduction

Access to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is becoming increasingly contested by leading powers. It is a theatre where the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China on the global stage intersects with the regional competition between India and China. Regional and extra-regional powers are having to step up their engagement across the IOR to counter China's growing presence and thus secure their own access to crucial sea lanes.

China's partnerships with Iran and Russia add another layer of complexity to the landscape of rising contestation. Existing geopolitical tensions, such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as between Iran and Israel, further jeopardise the long-term stability of the region.

India's central geographical location and its growing reliance on seaborne trade (over 90 % by volume) are key factors driving the rising

contestation in the IOR¹. However, the primary catalyst is the rollout of China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through the MSR, China is establishing a network of 'strategic strong-points' along its major sea lines of communication (SLOCs), facilitating the development of a robust logistics infrastructure for managing the flow of commodities back to mainland China². The fear is that Beijing could gain too much control over international shipping and influence key SLOCs. In addition, the bulk of overseas ports with Chinese investment have the potential for dual civilian-military use. The BRI has further led to regional polarisation in the IOR among countries that have decided to be part of it and those who have declined; India has vehemently opposed the project.

China's gradual penetration of the Indian Ocean has triggered a hedging response from smaller littoral and island states, resulting in growing

instability. Among other Indian Ocean regional powers, Australia has become the second-largest recipient of Chinese port investment, despite not being a signatory to the BRI and a 'like-minded' country³. France, considered a regional power, maintains a strategic presence through its Indian Ocean territories (Mayotte and Reunion), while extra-regional powers, like the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan, are demonstrably reinvesting in the region. Russia is also seeking to step up its engagement in the Indian Ocean via military partnerships and through the annual Security Belt naval exercises that it conducts with China and Iran.

An Ocean of Contestation

Rising contestation currently has less to do with outright military confrontation and more with securing overseas interests and crucial SLOCs. The Indian Ocean carries a significant share of global trade, with 50 % of container traffic and 70 % of oil and gas trade flowing through its waters⁴. The Suez-Malacca route, a vital artery for global maritime commerce, also contains critical shipping chokepoints⁵. China's MSR aims to connect China to South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa by building deep-water seaports with potential for naval use in strategically-located littoral and island states in the IOR. Beijing has been clear about the need to safeguard its national security, including its institutions, personnel and assets abroad⁶.

This has created apprehension among smaller South Asian and other IOR countries whose ports are under Chinese ownership. This concern stems from cases like Kyauk Pyu Port in Myanmar, where China holds a 70 % stake, or Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, leased to China

for an extendable period of 99 years⁷. Construction of such ports is often accompanied by Chinese investments in adjacent free economic zones with backup port industries and additional transport infrastructure. Examples include Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connecting it to Xinjiang, and Doraleh Multipurpose Port in Djibouti, linked to the Djibouti-Ethiopia railway, among others. Australia hosts two commercial ports on lease from Chinese companies and one with 50 % Chinese ownership, all three of which could potentially be used for dual-use purposes⁸.

The Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) 2022 Annual Report highlights hybrid – including aerial vehicles and drones – and cybersecurity maritime security threats as increasingly prevalent in the IOR⁹. Commercial shipping and port infrastructure are both vulnerable, given that ships are often the targets of such attacks, and as demonstrated by the ransomware attack on Mumbai's Jawaharlal Nehru Port Container Terminal. Protecting undersea cables is another issue of concern. Outside powers' interference and full or partial ownership of such infrastructure adds to the uncertainty. A recent incident involving the simultaneous but unexplained damage to four undersea telecommunications cables along the Bab el-Mandeb Strait highlights this vulnerability. They will be hard to repair due to the continuing Houthi attacks on commercial vessels.

Proliferation of Dual-use Ports and Military Bases

According to official Chinese sources, only Djibouti has followed the 'first civilian, then military' port model thus far¹⁰. Yet, the US Department of Defense lists Angola, Cambodia, Equatorial Guinea, Indonesia, Kenya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand and the UAE as potential locations for Chinese military logistics facilities¹¹. Nonetheless, by the time China officially opened its PLA base in Djibouti in 2017, it had effectively already become a military hub in the IOR; the United States, Japan, Italy

and France (including German and Spanish contingents) had already set up military bases there, followed by Saudi Arabia most recently. Similarly, other regional actors are expanding their military presence: the UAE has set up a military base in Eritrea, Türkiye has established one in Somalia while Russia aims to do so along the Sudanese Red Sea coastline.

Chinese physical presence in Indian Ocean waters has now evolved beyond dual-use ports to include surveillance research ‘spy’ vessels,

mission-ready ships deployed across strategic ports and facilities specifically designed to support military activities¹². It is estimated that nearly half of the ports with Chinese terminals have access to dry docks and a number of these have hosted ‘technical stops’ where substantial repair work on People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels and equipment has taken place¹³. There are also Chinese-built submarine bases, such as BNS Sheikh Hasina Submarine Base in Bangladesh, where two Chinese submarines sold to the Bangladeshi Navy are anchored¹⁴.

The growing number of Chinese coastal deployments with military potential along the ‘String of Pearls’¹⁵ has heightened New Delhi’s threat perception as well as the concerns of extra-regional powers. India has responded with its own ‘Necklace of Diamonds’. This involves a combination of building strategic ports (such as Chabahar in Iran or Sittwe in Myanmar) and securing access rights to crucial ports and bases¹⁶ across strategic locations in the IOR¹⁷. There is an Indian Ocean Navy outpost in North Agalega

island (Mauritius) with capacity for a deep-sea port, which is also the case of the geostrategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Indian territory)¹⁸, which lie in close proximity to a suspected Chinese secret intelligence post in Myanmar’s Coco Islands¹⁹. New Delhi is further strengthening its presence by providing naval training, organising joint patrols and undertaking joint naval exercises with regional and extra-regional countries. But China is doing likewise.



The sea phase of the ASEAN Maritime Exercise, ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME-2023), May 2023. | Press Information Bureau.

Instrumentalisation of Littoral and Small-Island States in the IOR

Littoral and small island states in the IOR are increasingly caught between China and India, exhibiting ‘swing behaviour’ as they navigate between both powers. It is noteworthy that, except for Bhutan, India’s immediate neighbours have all joined the BRI. This fragmentation weakens New Delhi’s regional leverage and benefits Beijing. China is further consolidating its position by becoming a key arms supplier to countries in the region. It is now the top supplier of arms to Pakistan and Thailand, directly challenging the United States in the case of Bangkok. It ranks furthermore among the top five suppliers to Tanzania and Sri Lanka. It is similarly challenging India’s position in Myanmar and that of both the United States and India in the case of Sri Lanka. Interestingly, India is the top arms supplier to the Maldives²⁰.

The recent shift in Maldivian foreign policy illustrates the potential risks that hedging strategies pose to the stability of the IOR. The Maldives’ antagonistic behaviour towards New Delhi has become publicly visible following the September 2023 presidential elections that brought Mohamed Muizzu to power. In contrast to his predecessor, soon after taking office Muizzu opted to attend the China-led Indian Ocean Region Forum instead of the India-led Colombo Security Conclave. The ongoing spat between India and the Maldives is escalating to the point that India was requested to withdraw its military personnel from the geo-strategic island by 15 March 2024. Soon after that, the Maldives signed a military pact with China for the provision of military assistance. Male recently also authorised the Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 3 to dock in its port.

India has actively sought to limit Chinese access to Sri Lankan ports. In 2023 the Indian government managed to persuade Colombo to impose a one-year moratorium on foreign research vessels. New Delhi wanted to avoid what they perceive as Chinese research ‘spy’ vessels from accessing Sri Lanka’s ports yet again. India had learned its lesson after the Chinese-Sri

Lanka Hambantota port deal in 2017. Furthermore, when the Sri Lankan government cancelled a joint India-Japan Memorandum of Understanding for the East Container Terminal project in Colombo in 2021, the Indian Adani Group, in a strategic move, acquired a majority stake in Colombo Port’s West International Container Terminal in a joint venture with Sri Lankan partners. The US government supported this with additional funding after China pledged major investment in a large logistics complex at Colombo port some months earlier²¹.

Identifying Needs and Opportunities

To begin with, there is a need to address the Indian Ocean in and of itself as a security and geostrategic construct. The obvious challenge to this is the size and diversity of the region: it encompasses continental powers, some large economies such as India, Australia or Indonesia, alongside small nation-states and low-income economies. Furthermore, countries like Iran or Pakistan may often diverge from India, Australia and France in their respective relationships with China and the United States. Cooperation is thus unlikely while additional contestation is predictable in such a complex and diverse geopolitical landscape.

However, despite the current fragmentation driven by China’s growing influence across the IOR, there might be potential for cohesion if effectively managed by its rivals. China’s increasing geo-economic and ‘soft’ military penetration of the IOR is likely to lead regional actors to turn to Washington as the preferred security provider, as long as it does not seek to dominate.

The United States has experience of building coalitions in the Indian Ocean as evidenced by initiatives like the Combined Maritime Forces (CMFs)²². India, together with key regional powers such as Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Singapore, would likely need to co-

operate with such US-led initiatives. In the long-term, and despite its closest neighbours' potential concerns, India has a central role to play in shaping IOR regional architecture. This can counterbalance attempts at extra-territorial dominance by China or the United States. For this to succeed, regional cohesion is essential.

In this context, India is playing a key role in consolidating the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which has²³ IOR resident countries as members, including France, but excluding Pakistan, Myanmar and Saudi Arabia. It also has eleven dialogue partners, which include China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, Türkiye and a number of European countries. The EU has recently become IORA's 12th Dialogue Partner.

India must be the key vector for a stronger EU investment in the IOR. New Delhi has already conducted joint naval exercises with EU NAVFOR Somalia in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Oman, respectively. The IFC-IOR in India further plays a crucial role in strengthening maritime security in the region. It has become a key maritime information sharing hub that hosts Liaison officers from partner countries including the QUAD members as well as neighbouring countries France, Italy and UK.

Operationally-speaking, the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), serving littoral states in Southern and East Africa, has its own executive arm for maritime security: the Regional Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar and the Regional Centre for Operational Coordination in Seychelles. Both Regional Centres have reached out to extra-regional actors such as the EU and the UK. They conducted their first joint operation, MARLIN, with EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta in December 2021 through the EU-funded Regional Maritime Security Programme (MASE). India has further sought increased EU involvement with littoral states in Southern and East Africa through the

Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment. This is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing Red Sea crisis and Houthi attacks against commercial shipping.

There is also growing room for collaboration between the EU and key IOR powers via ESIWA's²⁴ expanded mandate that now includes safeguarding maritime infrastructure, counterterrorism, as well as addressing cyber- and hybrid threats. The EU must scale up its bilateral investment and security relations with small littoral and island IOR countries, particularly along the coasts of Southern and East Africa, where it already has more of a foothold. It could start with trust-building mechanisms – such as CRIMARIO II's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) initiative – or the securitisation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). These efforts can be complemented by expanding bilateral and trilateral naval exercises, ideally involving India and a third like-minded partner, such as Japan or the United States.

Conclusion

The IOR is likely to see an intensification of competition, driven not only by China but also by actors like Iran and Russia – and their proxies. For now, China's gradual but steady expansion has filled the power vacuum that previously existed in the region, prompting a renewed focus by extra-regional powers anxious about securing access to crucial SLOCs and strategic locations across the IOR's littoral and island states. We can expect these countries to display increasingly unpredictable 'swing behaviour' as they navigate their relationships with both India and China. While the elites of smaller littoral and island nation-states in the IOR possess agency, they are also vulnerable to manipulation by leading powers. To safeguard its own maritime security interests, it is imperative for the EU to make

strategic investments, both political and financial, in securing the stability of the Indian Ocean.

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Regional Cooperation

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BAY OF BENGAL IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Tariq Karim



A cargo ship plying its trade in the Indian Ocean. | Economic Times.

Introduction

Our planet, Earth, is predominantly made up of oceans, with 71% of its surface covered in water. All oceans are integrally interlinked in our oceanic planet. What happens in one ocean can and often does impact other such water bodies. The Indian Ocean – the third-largest ocean in this configuration – by virtue of its geographical location is sometimes referred to as the “Great Middle Bay”. It has catapulted to become a dominant global geopolitical and economic force and arena for contestation in the 21st Century, with its geopolitical importance being dramatically increased by virtue of its increasing

centrality in global trade, industry, labour, environment and security issues.

Colonization resulted in the European powers competing for access to resources and new domains as markets overseas, far from their own native shores, and conducting extensive trade with or economic exploitation of those regions mostly using the sea lanes. Their quest for extractable resources and markets was essentially enabled by sea power. The strategic significance for trade

and military movement was further enhanced by maritime connectivity to distant regions.

Successive colonial powers such as the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British used the sea lanes to foray into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to establish colonies in the 18th/19th Centuries. British colonial power asserted itself the most using this newfound sea power. By 1900 through their ability to dominate the sea lanes, Britain had turned the Indian Ocean “into a British Lake”. Today, over 90% of global trade by volume uses sea routes.

American Admiral Mahan strategically foresaw the importance of the oceans for nations when he famously enunciated:

“Let us not shrink from pitting a broad self-interest against the narrow self-interest to which some would restrict us Let us start with the fundamental truth, warranted by history, that the control of the seas, and especially along the great lines drawn by national interest or national commerce, is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations. It is so because the sea is the world’s great medium of circulation ...”

– Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, US Naval Historian and Strategist (Army & Navy Journal of London, January 1898)

Mahan’s logic was derived from his perception that Britain had wrested world power status in the 19th Century primarily by establishing dominance on or monopoly of the seas. Maritime commerce involved exchange of finished products for supplies and raw materials extracted, either by extortion or under agreement from the overseas domains (the basic tenet of colonialism). This could only be secured by ensuring command over the seas, whether in war or peace. He concluded that sea-borne commerce makes a nation great. From this hypothesis, Mahan forcefully advocated that the US should have a Navy second to none to acquire

great power status.

Mahan’s strategic philosophy, at that time, was primarily for the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and coal as the main energy source. However, the discovery of vast oil reservoirs in the Persian Gulf-Arabian Peninsula regions at the turn of 19th/early 20th Century gave increasing pre-eminence to oil over coal as fuel for industrial development and growth. The Indian Ocean inevitably catapulted to centre-stage in recent time, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal and its command of the gateway to Persian Gulf hydrocarbon resources.

“It is only since the beginning of the 1970s that the Indian Ocean and its littoral states, which belong predominantly to the Third World, have begun to take on the characteristics of a major political region. The main factor contributing to this development was the assertive global strategy of the two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) Conflicts with their origin outside the area (East-West and Sino-Soviet) ... spread to the Indian Ocean Area. These outside influences, together with a growing number of conflicts between states within the region, point clearly to a need to seek and implement guidelines for limiting conflict and encouraging regional cooperation.”

– Dieter Braun in Preface to ‘The Indian Ocean – Region of Conflict or ‘Zone of Peace?’ (1983) Wissenschaft Stiftung und Politik, Munich.

Applying the Mahan paradigm exponentially enhanced the importance of the Indian Ocean, progressively since the 1970s in the 20th Century and now well into the 21st Century.

The Indian Ocean: Relevance for Global Trade, Energy and Food Security

Over 90% of global trade uses sea routes, with over 80% of maritime oil trade passing through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Over 95% of China's trade with the Middle East, Africa and Europe transits the Indian Ocean, while India's maritime trade is over 70% by volume. The Indian Ocean also holds valuable resources such as fisheries and minerals. The Northern Indian Ocean is a crucial passageway for global east-west-east trade. Ensuring the uninterrupted flow of crude oil across the Indian Ocean and other oceanic regions is essential for major, middle and minor powers. However, the risk of strategic competition escalating into active contestation is a danger that all must avoid.

The states in the IOR hold more than 58% of the world's proven oil and over 46% of the world's gas reserves. Globally, the Persian Gulf has emerged as the most important source of crude oil. The East African coast on the Indian Ocean also emerged as another major petroleum frontier. Seabeds beneath the Timor Sea and the Bay of Bengal also contain substantial hydrocarbon (petroleum and gas) reserves. The competition between India and China over access to Myanmar's offshore gas fields is partly attributable to the same compulsions.

The Northern Indian Ocean constitutes a key passageway in global east-west-east trade. Maintaining unimpeded flow of crude oil from producing to consuming countries in the IOR and across to other oceanic regions (through gateways/chokepoints) is a sine qua non for all major, middle or minor powers. Hence, the likelihood of strategic competition spiralling into active contestation is an underlying danger that all need to avoid. Singapore appears set to remain a strategic petroleum gateway between Indian and the Pacific Ocean to China, Japan and South Korea.

The Indian Ocean also contains non-energy renewable and non-renewable resources. Fisheries and minerals are the most

commercially viable resources. Since more than a billion people globally rely on marine fish as their main source of protein, it adds strategic value to this oceanic region which hosts 45% of the world's fisheries and accounts for 20% of total global fish production.

However, there remain problems of overfishing, over exploitation and poaching in non-territorial waters or adjacent Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ's) that could result in over-exploitation and depletion of fish stock with serious implications for regional and global food security. The seabeds also contain an abundance of golf/tennis ball-sized polymetallic nodules containing nickel, cobalt, iron, manganese and polymetallic massive sulphides that contain gold and greater copper, all of which exponentially increase the strategic value of these waters.

Bioprospecting for genetic resources may lead to new products and applications in medicine. Additionally, coastal sediments along many coastlines of this ocean contain titanium and zirconium (mainly off South Africa and Mozambique), tin placer deposits (off Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia) and zinc and copper ore in heavy mud in the Red Sea. The presence of numerous global powers – both extra-regional and regional – is testimony to the growing importance of the Indian Ocean over the last one hundred years.

The Political Economy of a Probable “Bay of Bengal Community”



The Indian Navy delegation participated in the maiden International Fleet Review hosted by Bangladesh, December 2022. | Ministry of Defence.

The Westphalian order led to European colonialism, while the fall of colonial powers after World War II marked the rise of new superpowers and the era of ‘neo-super colonialism’. Lesser powers must strategize for survival in a world dominated by global giants. Like the ‘divide-and-rule’ method of European colonial powers, neo-super colonists use similar tools to divide nations against each other in today's global power play.

The Bay of Bengal, an integral part of the Indian Ocean with a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of USD 7 trillion, can form a ‘community’ of nations bridging together the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regions that would enhance overall cooperation.

Sub-regional cooperation within SAARC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) could further contribute to regional cohesion. The region has a dispute-free maritime environment and fast-growing economies, and is a battleground for competing narratives from significant superpowers. Collaboration between these countries is crucial to address ecological threats and ensure a sustainable blue economy.

A cohesive community of Bay of Bengal littorals – initially through a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation – could potentially evolve into a Bay of Bengal Community unlocking limitless possibilities for prosperity. While a regional organization for cooperation, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) among Bay of Bengal countries has existed since 1997 and till date, it has no remarkable achievement to its credit.

The BIMSTEC's nomenclature is a misnomer since some of the most important Bay of Bengal littoral states (namely Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore) are not members of it. Were the current BIMSTEC configuration to be expanded to make it truly an inclusive organization for all Bay of Bengal littorals, then one might reasonably expect a quantum leap forward in its ability to meaningfully address multi-sectoral issues effectively and to everyone's benefit.

Conclusion

The Bay of Bengal countries have the potential to form a cohesive community that fosters economic cooperation, promotes peaceful connectivity, and addresses common challenges, charting a path toward prosperity and security for the region and beyond. However, only with an expanded configuration could it then embark on putting in place a regional governance framework for the Bay of Bengal microcosmic entity that could serve as a model for other regions.

(This is a modified version of the author's article "Connectivity and Cooperation: The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indian Ocean" published as a Working Paper by ISAS, National University of Singapore, on 3rd August 2023)



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ENHANCING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Dr. Frederic Grare



Preliminary medical check-up onboard INS Tarkash in Djibouti during Yemen evacuation operations, April 2015. | Indian Navy.

Introduction

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) cooperation is increasingly becoming a theme of central importance in international debates. Natural disasters are increasing globally, calling everywhere for collective responses. In a context of great power rivalry though, the cooperative nature of HADR is increasingly impacted by geostrategic considerations and is no longer only a demonstration of good will.

HADR is increasingly becoming competitive. It has gradually transformed into a zero-sum game, with the recipient states being conferred significant bargaining power in the process. In practical terms, it means that the providing countries no longer have to focus exclusively on capacities, already a problem in normal times. They must also accommodate the political will of

recipient states which is not matched by the necessary capabilities to receive HADR.

The Indian Ocean Region illustrates better than any other the difficulties inherent to the implementation of effective HADR coordination mechanisms. The lack of capacity of a substantial number of regional states, particularly (but not exclusively) on the African coast; weak governance, especially at sea; the political fragmentation of the area; and the rivalries between states; are all obstacles that China's presence is exacerbating. All multilateral initiatives to create regional or even sub-regional HADR coordination mechanisms have so far yielded little or no results. The promises of the QUAD in the matter, have so far not changed this reality.

The present paper postulates that the success or failure of any future architecture in the Indian

Ocean will be premised on its capacity to navigate these various constraints. It will have to transform recipient states from consumers to stakeholders of HADR in a context of huge discrepancy between their capacities and political aspirations.

Building such an architecture will therefore be a slow and likely frustrating process. But the case can be made that since the relationships of the major actors with their immediate neighbours is often burdened by historical and political baggage, there is a need to enlarge existing coordination mechanisms beyond their sub-regional dimension, in order to overcome the political difficulties in case of disasters.

The changing significance of HADR operations

HADR has never really been exclusively the expression of a moral duty, a benign tool providing exceptional assistance to vulnerable populations.¹ Nor have geopolitical considerations ever been absent from the conduct of its operations. It always was – for the providing countries – an occasion to demonstrate their capacities as well as their commitment to the region in which they were operating, also offering opportunities for coalition-building and engagements with new partners.

This, however, is evolving today due to a changing perception of the nature of threats and a different understanding of the global security environment:

Threat perceptions are still linked to power rivalries, but also to non-traditional security concerns of which natural disasters constitute an important dimension. In an era of diminished legitimacy of wars as a state policy, the ability to respond to natural disasters inevitably becomes an instrument (among others) for asserting influence.

In this context, climate change is of growing importance, both as a risk multiplier, and a factor of resources depletion. It is, moreover, perceived as having the potential to change the operational

environment in which armed forces operate. It has consequently increased the strategic nature of HADR as well as the attention it receives.

Militarization is also an important factor in the changing significance and politicisation of HADR. The increase in the number of disasters linked to climate change make the Armed Forces, which can be always mobilized, an increasingly relevant actor. Indeed, although HADR is not their primary *raison d'être*, the Armed Forces are ambivalent about it as they spend more time conducting HADR than actual combat operations. From their perspective, HADR competence is an indicator of the operational readiness of conventional forces. But it inevitably confers HADR operations a potentially coercive dimension even if it contributes to softening the image of the military and its acceptance by local populations.

Politicisation – which is not exclusively linked to the militarization of HADR – increasingly impacts HADR. The degree of political penetration by HADR actors, significantly impacts the logistics and therefore the efficacy of the operations, as they can be implemented only with the agreement of recipient countries, while overseas military bases is also a facilitating factor.

Moreover, HADR operations rarely take place in a political and historical vacuum. Historical baggage often plays a role in the perception of operations by the populations and governments of the affected countries. Disasters produce opportunities for change in relationships, through non-coercive measures such as rescue missions in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters. HADR has therefore the potential to influence the nature of international relations of countries afflicted by disasters.

Ultimately, the emergence of new actors, in particular China, also affects the role and significance of HADR. The impact of

operations varies according to the intention of the provider. The growing needs for HADR capacities of a majority of Indian Ocean coastal or island states, combined with the growing polarisation of international and regional relations undoubtedly make HADR an instrument of strategic competition, with polarisation giving the recipient countries considerable leverage in the process.

Indian Ocean HADR institutional architectures: the impossible cooperation

Despite these evolutions, cooperation in HADR remains underdeveloped in the Indian Ocean where the existing coordination mechanisms provide for a very uneven coverage of the different subregions.

HADR cooperation did not really begin in South Asia until 2005, in the aftermath of the tsunami and the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) developed the comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management (SCFMD). Each country in the region has since established a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). Three regional centres were subsequently created to implement the SCFMD: The SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) based in New Delhi, the SAARC Meteorological Centre, based in Dhaka and the SAARC Coastal Management Centre (SCMC) located in Male.²

However, none of the SAARC pledges materialised. The SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND), signed in 2010 by all member states, was ratified only by India. The Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM), which provided for the identification by each SAARC member country of equipment and capabilities that could be mobilized as part of the collective response, never saw the light of day, while a series of annual collective disaster response exercises did not go beyond the inaugural exercise.³ Weak capabilities of some states, like Nepal, that do not

have the resources to help other states, explains that situation. But political tensions within SAARC, in particular tensions between India and Pakistan, are also to blame.⁴

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is not equipped to respond directly to disasters. It has nevertheless announced some Guidelines for HADR in November 2021,⁵ and addressed the topic in the IORA's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific published in December 2022.⁶ But, if it seems eager to increase cooperation in disaster response, action remains extremely limited. Initiatives are not structured within the organization and depend largely on individual initiatives.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which includes Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Bhutan and Nepal, recognized the need for regional cooperation on HADR in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. However, it called for exercises only in 2016. The organization struggles to involve the armed forces of all its member states, some of them lacking the necessary resources.

Indeed, most HADR operations conducted in the region are highly dependent on India,⁷ which invites IORA member states in its own HADR seminars and training, but organises few, if any of them, within the regional structure. Similarly, India has so far, hosted all BIMSTEC exercises.

The situation is slightly different in the South-West of the Indian-Ocean where the mechanisms implemented by the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) as part of the regional maritime safety programme (MASE),⁸ funded by the European Union, are all valuable tools for conducting HADR operations, although these mechanisms are not exclusively dedicated to HADR.

The regional Centre for the Fusion of Maritime

Information (CRFIM), based in Madagascar, is a regional centre for the exchange and fusion of maritime information over an area stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to the Babel-Mandeb Strait. It is complemented by the Regional Coordination Centre for Operations at Sea (CRCO),⁹ based in the Seychelles, whose main function is to conduct joint operations. Both centres are essential and complementary instruments for maritime security in the sub-region.

Coordination mechanisms indeed remain underdeveloped in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the creation of an Indian Ocean HADR architecture is unlikely to emerge from existing mechanisms because of uneven coverage of the different subregions.

Enhancing HADR cooperation in the Indian Ocean

Such a situation does not augur well for the future of HADR coordination mechanisms in the Indian Ocean. However, none can be expected to be built outside existing realities and will have to start with a sustained effort of capacity-building. The following additional factors will also have to be taken into consideration:

1. Limited capacities have not prevented a desire for greater participation in and greater appropriation of HADR. This is perhaps the most important factor and cannot be ignored even if it only complicates any potential attempt to rationalise regional cooperation.
2. The states most likely to constitute the pillars of any future architectures are also the most burdened with political and strategic baggage in the region. The reality of the latter is irrelevant here. What matters is the perception by the partners, actual and/or potential.

3. Moreover, as underlined by a 2024 report of the Canberra-based National Security College, “the scale and diversity of the Indian Ocean militates against a single disaster preparedness, prevention and response and recovery architecture”.¹⁰

The proposed architectures are therefore likely to be processes rather than fixed frameworks, to build on existing structures, acknowledging their deficiencies, and to gradually move to more united coordination mechanisms.



India, the U.S., Australia, and Japan will sign the HADR agreement, September 2022 | Sriram Lakshman.

Devising an Indian Ocean HADR coordination mechanism

1. The IONS as a permanent secretariat and coordination mechanism for HADR in the Indian Ocean

In this context, one could imagine a dual-track mechanism, based on existing structures but specifying the role of each and articulating them whenever possible.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is perhaps the platform with the most interesting potential to develop a regional coordination mechanism. Politically, it includes most of the navy chiefs of the littoral and island states of the Indian Ocean. It already conducts exercises to promote interoperability between navies and organises regular conferences and seminars for the exchange of best practices.¹¹ The IONS has also published guidelines for HADR, which specifies that the

commitment of national capabilities by member states can only be made on a voluntary basis and respecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national legislation of the affected state.¹²

It also details the main mechanism of action and is unquestionably the most operational platform in the Indian Ocean, even if HADR cooperation at sea remains inhibited by a series of factors. The lack of interoperability which enable navies of different sizes and natures to cooperate effectively is the predominant problem.

The IONS could potentially perform a central role as the default coordination mechanism and work over time, on the unification of the Indian Ocean operating procedures. This role could be fulfilled through the current IONS HADR Working Group, enlarged to include Singapore, South Africa, Kenya and the UAE.¹³ All of them are politically relatively compatible and since they represent different parts of the Indian Ocean, be more acceptable to the affected countries of HADR operations than powers external to the considered sub-region. The larger participation would be politically inclusive, without affecting the decision-making process or the operations.

Its functions would be three-fold:

- a. It would act as a HADR secretariat for the Indian Ocean playing for IONS members the role initially dedicated to the SAARC Natural Disaster Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM), which never materialized. IONS member states would be requested to take legislative and administrative measures to implement, on a voluntary basis the provisions of the IONS guidelines. These include measures for requesting and receiving assistance; conducting needs assessments; mobilizing equipment, personnel, materials and other facilities; making regional standby arrangements, including emergency stockpiles; and ensuring quality control of relief items. It would maintain a roster of assets that could be potentially mobilized in real time and work on all the legalities indispensable to diminish the time of response to disaster and facilitate the operations. IONS would operate on the model of the Natural Rapid Response Mechanism (NDRRM), initiated by SAARC, that was signed in 2011, and ratified in 2016, but never really created.¹⁴
- b. It would also be in charge of capacity-building. Capacities and capabilities should indeed be maintained and improved through interoperability and created in countries where they do not exist or prove insufficient. The training aspect of the IONS (conferences and seminars for the exchange of best practices) would be institutionalized within the institution in an HADR Centre of Excellence. This Centre of Excellence, would be in charge of all matters related to capacity building and planning of exercises between navies.
- c. The IONS would also act as a coordinating mechanism each time the needs of a specific country or sub-region affected by a disaster would surpass its response capacity. The political diversity of the states represented in the IONS HADR Working Group would facilitate access to the national authorities of the affected countries and, whenever necessary, help overcome the bilateral difficulties linked to historical or political baggage which have sometimes prevented

or delayed operations in the past. Such a task is already assumed by the IONS Secretariat whenever the need has arisen.

2. Mobilizing the players

The number of countries capable of providing assets for the projection of relief material is limited and unevenly located around the Indian Ocean. India, Australia and France of course but also Singapore, Indonesia, South Africa, and increasingly the United Arab Emirates and perhaps Kenya, could be in this context the main providers of assistance. Not all of them have the range of large, medium and small ships or helicopters that allow for the transportation of personnel and material, not just to the affected countries but also to the most remote locations where these personnel and material are expected to reach. This will have to be taken into account when deciding available mechanisms in the Indian Ocean.

Since HADR efficiency is determined by the speed of the response and therefore a function of the distance and the capacities, existing sub-regional coordination mechanisms should be preserved if they have proved to be relevant. The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) for example, has two valuable assets: the Regional Centre for the Fusion of Maritime Information (CRFIM) based in Madagascar which covers an area stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Seychelles-based Regional Coordination Centre for operations at Sea (CRCO). Both these IOC assets are essential for maritime HADR operations although not exclusively dedicated to it.

Individual countries like India would also play a major role, directly and/or under the auspices of IONS, as its location and capacities (including the Gurugram-based IFC-IOR) makes it an operational partner of choice for the entire region. However, the operational consequences of the politically difficult relationships it sometimes has with its neighbours could be reduced if it operated under an IONS label.

Conclusion

One may ultimately argue that there is no urgency in building an HADR coordination mechanism in the Indian Ocean. Thanks to the capacity of India as well as other external powers, regional countries have always managed to cope with disasters of all kinds.

Two reasons however argue against complacency:

The Indian Ocean is warming at higher rates than global oceans. Although there is no certainty regarding the impact this may have on the frequency of all categories of tropical cyclones in the long term, its intensity is likely to increase significantly and therefore their consequences on the regional countries, in particular the island states which tend to be more vulnerable.¹⁵ Overall coastal states might also be affected by continuous rise in sea levels, resulting in severe coastal erosion and floods. Hence the need to intensify preparedness across the region.

Moreover, as indicated in the introduction, China is emerging as a major HADR actor across the Indo-Pacific. In the Indian Ocean, its interventions have been so far limited to its periphery – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan. Yet, its presence in the Indian Ocean is no longer marginal and will increasingly be felt should disasters multiply in the region. True, HADR is only one of the instruments through which China develops its regional influence.

HADR is also an integral part of its development strategy. Its importance lies much less in its practices or the volume of its operations than in its political significance and strategic consequences. It creates a new situation in which regional states see the possibility of acquiring margins of diplomatic manoeuvre as well as political visibility so far non-existent and which they are unlikely to renounce.

China's HADR cannot be rejected which would be counter-productive, any more than its impact can be ignored. But it can and should be singled out for everybody to see that its methods do not respect international HADR norms.

This combination of humanitarian and strategic considerations is not an abstract construct which can be conveniently ignored to conduct business as usual HADR preparations and operations. It does question the role of the recipient countries who cannot simply be seen as passive objects of external benevolence and have fully understood the opportunities that arise from the current polarization.

This should in turn lead to consider turning recipient states of HADR from consumers to stakeholders. The asymmetry in resource endowment will inevitably make it a long-term process but this should not prevent current stakeholders to associate them into the conversation over HADR.

The benefits could be threefold: It would improve the level of preparedness and reactions to disaster and improve the efficiency of HADR operations. In the process, it would help bypass the political difficulties among Indian Ocean actors in their reactions to disasters and conduct of relief operations. It would ultimately reduce the political benefits that China would derive from its HADR operations. It would be one actor among others and not necessarily the most important.

India by contrast, would remain the predominant HADR-provider by virtue of its geographic location and capacities. However, these also tend to create a feeling of insecurity in some of its proximate neighbours, driving them closer to China. India would therefore benefit from a more

cooperative approach, driven politically by more diverse partners which would dilute the perception of “big brother politics by other means”. India’s partners would in return benefit from India’s support in Indian Ocean sub-regions where they face similar problems.

The question remains as to who should take the lead for what would be admittedly a politically and technically complex endeavour. The initiative can only be the one of states whose capabilities and experience confer them credibility. They should moreover be representative of various subregions of the Indian Ocean, be politically compatible and be able to reassure other partners.

All these reasons argue in favour of a trilateral cooperation among Australia, France and India. The three countries have a proven experience in HADR as well as capacities to intervene in various parts of the Indian Ocean. Australia, France and India have converging interests regarding China. They can operate respectively in the Northeast, the Southeast as well as the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

The three of them are reasonably compatible politically. Australia and India are part of the QUAD whereas France maintains an excellent political relationship with India and has initiated a reconciliation process with Australia. Each of them can bring reassurances to countries of the other’s sub-regions. Ultimately however, their role would be one of initiators and convenors, but not exclusive from other potential sponsors of the initiative.

Endnotes

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