

The Indian Ocean Rim Dynamics and New Challenges

Vice Admiral Satish Soni, PVSM, AVSM, NM (Retd)®

West Asia has a peripheral geographical linkage with the Indian Ocean and yet gets influenced by its dynamics and challenges. The following aspects are covered in this article :-

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- (c) India-China rivalry.
- (d) Maritime Security – A collective responsibility.
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- (j) Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Historical Perspective

Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world occupying approximately twenty per cent of the Earth's sea surface. With trade to and from the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) being lucrative, mariners from the littoral traded actively through the ages. No one enforced a maritime order at sea. There was a policy of live and let live. Sailors from distant lands including China joined in. The landing of Vasco da Gama in Calicut in 1498 changed all that. The Portuguese wanted the waters to themselves and tax others for its use. An intense power struggle ensued, between the Portuguese, home grown Admirals of Kunjali and Khanoji Angre lineage, Dutch and the British. The Mughals were a land-based empire and

ignored the sea. The British Empire that drew power mainly from its Naval fleet, emerged victorious and ruled the Indian Ocean well into the mid-20th Century. After the Second World War, the Royal Navy withdrew and the Indian Ocean became a stage for power play between the United States and the Soviet Navy. Ending of the Cold War has witnessed an overwhelming US military presence and infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Afghanistan; it has a major naval base in Diego Garcia; the Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain and units of the US Africa Command are stationed in Seychelles and Djibouti. The US is also spearheading international efforts for maintaining stability in the region; Task Forces 150 and 152 are stationed in the Gulf, Task Force 151 is stationed in the Horn of Africa, Naval ships from NATO countries for anti-Piracy duties and the European Union Naval Force (EURO-NAFOR) in support of the 'World Food Programme' missions are deployed off Somalia. At any time, over 120 warships from extra regional navies are present in this area.

The essence of highlighting this is that, historically, organic capacities to enforce a maritime order in the Indian Ocean have been lacking. Countries of the Indian Ocean have traditionally been blind to the sea. Maritime security has been outsourced. India has had a rich maritime heritage in ship building, trading with distant lands, voyages to spread Indian culture/Buddhism etc. But we regrettably were never muscular at sea. Kunjali was a pepper trader who lost business due to Portuguese interventions and took up arms; lasting just four generations. Similarly, Khanoji Angre was considered the first Maratha Naval Chief but was allegedly a pirate whose resistance lasted only two generations. The only exception to a passive maritime policy was perhaps Rajendra Chola in the 11th Century, who looked east with an expeditionary force.

Foremost challenge is for the maritime countries of the Indian Ocean region to assume responsibility, develop a strategic thought and have organic maritime security structures.

US-Iran and the Strait of Hormuz

20 per cent of world's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), 90 per cent of Gulf's oil exports i.e. 17 mn barrels of oil accounting for 30 per

cent of the total oil traded in the world, transits through this strait which is 33 kms at its narrowest. On an average 20 big oil tankers sail through this waterway every day. Fragile peace prevails as a result of the presence of the US led task forces and the peninsular shield of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Regional navies are fairly modern with Iran holding an edge over others; but no match to the multinational forces. Relations between US and Iran have been strained since 1980s and Iranian patrol boats allegedly harass US warships exercising in the area; the number of such incidents exceeded 30 in 2016. In Jan 2016, the Iranian Navy captured 10 US sailors whose boat had drifted into the territorial waters of Iran. Since last August, for some reason there hasn't been a perceptible calm which could be interpreted as an Iranian desire to mend fences and move on. Notwithstanding the acrimonious relationship, Iran has never followed through on threats to close the Hormuz strait, perhaps because such closure will deny import of refined petroleum products and export of her own crude.

In raising the level of confrontation with the US, Iranians would remember Operation Praying Mantis of 1988, when in retaliation of a mine attack on a US Naval warship, the US Navy sank half the operational Iranian fleet. The present standoff between the two countries may not embolden the Iranian Navy into any adventurism. But a challenge has emerged.

India-China Rivalry

India and China seem to be on a collision course in the waters of the Indian Ocean. Both Navies have been modernising at a steady pace with induction of aircraft carriers, Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear (SSBN) submarines, destroyers, frigates, long range maritime patrol aircraft etc; the Chinese Navy having an edge. Since the principal sources of Chinese energy either lie in the Indian Ocean, or must travel across the Indian Ocean, China is keen on acquiring a foothold in the area as is evident by development of a number of logistic bases including Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Feydhoo Finolhu in Maldives and Djibouti. Regional countries of the Indian Ocean are finding it difficult to resist the gravitational pull of the Chinese money and are being ensnared into debt traps. Chinese are leveraging this advantage for gaining coercive military dominance of the region.

The Indian Navy is a dominant force in the Indian Ocean with substantial influence over the littoral. In an effort to increase its maritime outreach, India is reportedly discussing establishment and development of bases on the Assumption Island (Seychelles) and Agalega Islands (Mauritius). There are efforts to improve connectivity by developing ports such as Chabahar in Iran and Sittwe in Myanmar.

Chinese aggressive stance in the South China Sea, its activism in South Asia and IOR and India's enthusiastic participation in the rejuvenated Quadrilateral dialogue is resulting in a head long clash. Smaller countries are getting anxious and would like to avoid taking sides as evident from public statements by Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Seychelles, Iran and so on. Both India and China would do well to constantly remind themselves that the world expects them to contribute to maritime security and not jeopardise it.

Last month Indian Navy was in the news for having 'welcomed' an incoming Chinese Navy task group to the Indian Ocean, insinuating that they were being watched. It is indeed customary for a Navy to mark their presence to an outsider as if to assert their jurisdiction; however, a rush of adrenalin during such unplanned encounters has the propensity to spiral spirited nationalistic displays into avoidable embarrassing situations, which if not de-escalated, can have graver and unforeseen implications for both parties. Whilst we have a "Peace and Tranquillity" agreement between the two countries on the land border, no such formal mechanism is in place to bridle the growing ambitions of the two Navies. It would be prudent to lay down Confidence Building Measures so that a contentious situation at sea can be de-escalated. Managing rivalry at sea is a challenge for the Asian giants as well as countries of the littoral.

Maritime Security- A Collective Responsibility

Somalia gained independence in 1960. The country did not do well and was a failed state by 1991. There was no governance on land, forget about the sea. The country did not claim the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that it was entitled to by United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and foreigners

poached their waters for over USD 300 mn of fish whilst Somalis starved on land. Somali waters became the toxic colony of the world with world's radioactive, industrial and hospital waste being dumped in their EEZ. Reportedly more than 35mn tonnes were dumped at a cost of 2.5 USD per tonne as opposed to over 1000 USD per tonne that it would have costed them to dispose this waste in Europe. Local militias took to coast guard policing and discovered that piracy was more profitable. USD 400 mn were paid in ransom from 2008 to 2012 for 178 successful hijackings in 645 attempts. After spending 7 to 9 bn USD a year, ironically by the western countries, piracy has now been brought under control somewhat.

What we must all realise is that lack of governance at sea is detrimental for everyone. Maritime Security is a collective responsibility and it is the duty of the more advanced navies to help the less capable ones so that such situations are avoided.

Blue Economy and Sustainable Development

Countries are looking to the seas for economic prosperity, food security and social wellbeing of their people, and there is a growing realisation that the emerging construct of Blue Economy holds great significance, especially, for the Indian Ocean Rim Region which is home to nearly one-third of the world's population. The rising demand for seabed minerals such as Polymetallic Nodules, Polymetallic Sulphides and Cobalt Crusts has resulted in increased commercial interest in seabed minerals. A term often heard in this regard is the 'new gold rush'. China and South Korea have joined India in obtaining exploration rights in the Indian Ocean. Very soon, sea bed mining is going to become cost-effective and there is going to be a scramble amongst maritime powers to reap dividends.

On 27 Sep 2015, the global community announced commitment to Sustainable Development Goals 2030 in which Goal 14 is to 'Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development'.

There is a symbiotic relationship between blue economy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and security and, therefore, ocean governance has become critical to ensure safety

and security of economic assets and activities such as offshore oil platforms, protection of marine wealth, prevention of illegal fishing, and upholding national environmental regulations, thereby, ensuring livelihoods of coastal populations as also enforcing national commitments to international agreements and initiatives such as the SDG 2030.

Of the first twenty in the fragile states index 2018, ten have their coastlines in the Indian Ocean. Many others have severe handicaps in enforcing rule of the law in their waters. This adds to the existing security challenges and robust maritime security architecture would have to be put in place, to derive benefits of the envisaged Blue economy initiatives. The need to provide maritime security to ocean resources is going to be the next challenge for all of us.

Human Trafficking

In the latter half of the previous century, higher demand in the labour market appeared as a by-product of economic development of the Gulf countries, Europe, North America and Australia. A large number of the populace from South Asia and Africa migrated or was hired by these relatively economically solvent countries. Unfortunately, migration aspirants from Bangladesh, the Rohingyas of Myanmar and the poor from the Indian and African coastal countries have become a target of human traffickers. Attracted by the employment potential, they are lured into taking illegal routes to reach the Gulf states and Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia for onward journeys, in search of better prospects, using the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. In 2015, the scenario ended in one of the largest human disasters in the region when huge mass graves were found in remote parts of Thailand; hundreds died at sea.

Existing Cooperative Mechanisms

Whilst we have a number of challenges and a non-existent organic maritime order, there are a number of platforms for maritime cooperation. Countries and their security agencies are

working hard to provide maritime security to their people. There has been a marked increase in levels of maritime cooperation – by way of bilateral and multilateral summits (for example first IORA Summit on 05 Mar 2017 in Jakarta, World Ocean Summit in Bali on 22 Feb 2017 to discuss blue economy, Shangrila Dialogue, Galle Dialogue, Indian Ocean Conference etc.), exchange of arms and defence technology, staff talks, port visits by warships, visits by Service officers and joint naval exercises. Numerous Think Tanks have sprung up and serve an important medium for Track 2 interactions.

Formal cooperative Mechanisms include the IORA-1997, IONS (2008), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (1981), South African Development Community (SADC) (1980), Arab League (1945), India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) (2003), Djibouti Code of Conduct (2009), South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (1985), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (1997) etc. And yet over the years we haven't been able to achieve much. Perhaps there is too much talk and not as much action.

Naval Cooperation with West Asia / Middle East

India's engagement in West Asia is often viewed through the prism of Oil trade and remittances from its seven million diaspora and defence analysts assess India as a benign actor that avoids participation in security issues. This is true. We have basic level but robust naval cooperation with all Arab states, importantly, not to the exclusion of a maritime relationship with Iran. Our warships visit almost all ports in the Persian Gulf. Senior officers take every opportunity to interact with their naval leadership. Some of our retired officers and sailors have been involved in training their naval personnel. With Oman, the level of naval cooperation is a bit advanced; in that we train their personnel in our training establishments, hold a biennial joint naval exercise and have logistic facilities at their port in Duqm. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, our technical naval cooperation with Israel has increased exponentially and it has become the 'Go To' country for state of the art weapon and electronic systems, for example Barak SAM and UAVs.

IORA and IONS

A key priority of IORA was to ensure reliable, uninterrupted and safe movement of people, goods, energy and resource supplies throughout the Indian Ocean and address issues related to maritime safety and security. And yet when piracy erupted off Somalia, Djibouti Code of Conduct was conceptualised to counter the menace. Obviously IORA was not considered effective and its continued relevance has been questioned. Indeed, IORA's achievements so far have been modest and there is room for speedy reforms. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Maldives, Myanmar are some of the important countries who are not members of IORA. An all-pervasive agreement for combating transnational non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, smuggling, maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, trafficking of human and narcotics, which can be legally enforced merit early discussion by all members. IONS could play an important role in orchestrating a collective response to Chinese strategic moves in the IOR as also to the many challenges at sea; the low hanging fruit being in institutionalising a common Maritime Domain Awareness, Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief mechanism and a Crisis Response Centre. All Arab states are members of IONS and Iran is currently Chairing it.

Conclusion

Oceans have traditionally been areas of contestation and the Indian Ocean is no different. The need to harness the economic dividends of the Blue economy must impel countries of the littoral to evolve a home grown maritime order that safeguards the aspirations of both the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in the IOR. Resurgent maritime powers, India and China have a responsible role to play as they join or replace the US and the Western powers to strengthen a maritime order in our waters.

@Vice Admiral Satish Soni, PVSM, AVSM, NM retired from the Indian Navy on 29 Feb 2016 after 40 years of service. He has held appointments of Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Eastern Naval Command, Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Southern Naval Command, Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Commandant National Defence Academy. He is a Distinguished Fellow with the United Service Institution of India, New Delhi.

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