

Fostering Strategic Maritime Partnership – Critical Analysis*

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The Oceans

Sitting strategically astride one of the busiest and most critical shipping lanes of the world, there is no place better than Galle in Sri Lanka, to brainstorm about the Oceans. There was a time when oceans were deemed barriers between land masses. That paradigm has shifted to view oceans as connectors of land masses. This has been made possible by maritime transportation offering economies of scale that far surpasses what is possible on continent; an edge that has only grown with passage of time.

The oceans not only serve as conduit for trade, but they also support economy through fishing and other oil and mineral extrusive economies. This is besides an ecosystem around them involving other industries such as tourism and power generation. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has brought out a recent report, it's first, defining the contours and trends of the Ocean Economy and it predicts that there will be a threefold growth in Ocean Economy by 2030. There is a symbiotic relationship between blue economy, sustainable development goals and security, and therefore, ocean governance has become a critical necessity.

The Indian Ocean straddles three continents and is home to some 50 states. It connects 38 littorals and an additional 12 land locked states in its hinterland. Together 40 per cent of world's population lives on its littorals. Interconnected global economies use Indian Ocean as a conduit. The centrality of the Indian Ocean to global trade and development is not something new. 90 per cent trade by volume traverses the ocean. Of which 60 per cent of oil,

*This is the text of a paper presented by Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd) at the 'Galle Dialogue 2016 : International Maritime Conference' conducted by the Sri Lankan Navy at Colombo on 28 and 29 Nov 2016.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLVI, No. 606, October-December 2016.

50 per cent container, 30 per cent bulk traffic traverses the Indian Ocean. This share is only rising unlike trends in other regions, where trade is decreasing. Therefore, Indian Ocean occupies a central position in the global trade pattern. The energy and resource needs of Japan, South Korea, China and ASEAN nations, and South Asian, West Asian and African markets form significant constituent of this trade thus, making Indian Ocean critical for global economy.

The Indo-Pacific

The Indian Ocean has strong linkages with the Pacific Ocean. Due to these enormous linkages, for any meaningful assessment or action one must consider Indian Ocean and parts of the Western Pacific as one system. This has been accepted as the Indo-Pacific strategic and economic system. Just as there are strategic power shifts there are also economic groupings taking shape. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Free Trade Area of Asia Pacific (FTAAP) were attempts to carve out large economic blocks that reflect the new order and realities. The Indo-Pacific is that strategic space where interests of several powers overlap, as indicated by the geographic envelopes of these aspirational blocks. Cooperation and competition will coexist in this region, where the stakeholders, who are eminently represented in this forum, will have to strive to manage friction below certain acceptable thresholds. These blocks are trans-oceanic and trans-continental in nature, where oceans will only become more important. The events in the Indo-Pacific will, therefore, continue to affect the globe, and will demand working out cooperative security structures for its management. We, at the USI of India have been hosting an international seminar every November looking at this issue in its entirety. These seminars have revealed the complexities and the vast scope of the problem.

The principle of Freedom of Navigation and rule of law, which is pivotal for global trade, therefore needs to be upheld across the oceans. As a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, India supports freedom of navigation and overflights, and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law, as reflected in United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Historically the world is on the cusp of a global power shift to Asia. The USA, the existing global power has declared its

intentions in Asia through its pivot, and the rising power of China has rolled out its geo-economic plans through the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative, which also has strategic implications for the region. The power structure that emerges out of these shifts may not resemble the bipolar model. In all likelihood, the future power structures will be diffused, where regional nations will have to play a major role, than rely solely on extra regional hegemony.

Managing Oceans – A Perspective

Such a precious network and ecosystem needs careful management. The scope of that management problem was evident in many recent episodes. First was the long drawn problem of piracy in the Western Indian Ocean. What began as illegal dumping of hazardous waste and illegal fishing off the Somali Coast robbed traditional Somali fishermen of their livelihood. This loss of livelihood and a weak political system ashore, brought the scourge of piracy alive in the oceans. It took patrols by 30 navies with hundreds of ships, costing US \$6 bn a year and a decade to push back the arc of operation of pirates. More recently, the loss and subsequent search for Malaysian Flight MH370 is awaiting closure. This indicates that oceans are still too large despite our advancement in technology! Oceans are also conduits for drug trafficking, human trafficking and terrorism. Terror through sea attained a different level first with attacks on Mumbai, and later it showed its terrifying possibilities when insiders almost hijacked a naval frigate of a nuclear nation of South Asia. Imagine the consequences, had that frigate been the one with tactical nuclear weapons on it!

The problem of good order at sea not only encompasses man made challenges but also covers natural calamities. Prime on the mind is a tsunami that swamped this part of the globe in 2004 killing 2,25,000 people. Indications are that climate change could accentuate the scope and frequency of other natural challenges. Rise of sea levels can alter coastal geographies, cause extreme weather phenomenon such as droughts and floods, decrease arable land and contaminate potable water. These will lead to demographic and migratory pressures. Resource conflicts may make rule based boundary delimitations important, where incidentally South Asia offers some positive case studies. Nations in the region cannot manage these myriad challenges alone.

The size and scope of the problem of ensuring safe oceans demands a cooperative structure. This has been recognised early, when the concept of the thousand ship navy (TSN) found traction. Admiral Mike Mullen, then Chief of Naval Operations of US Navy, was the progenitor of that concept who correctly recognised that no navy could **do it alone** in the future. He called for a Global Maritime Partnership to ensure good order at sea. Some principles of TSN continue to be relevant as far as regional maritime cooperation is concerned. It postulates that many of the problems that challenge good order at sea can be solved through cooperation and a shared interest.

With new global realities of diffused power structures the focus is on regional cooperation networks than dependence on any distant hegemon. The key requirement of such a regional network is strategic trust and a significant step in that direction is sharing of information. Together we have to make oceans more transparent by sharing information on commercial vessels at sea, popularly known as white shipping data which include details of vessels, cargo, position and destination. At any given time there are thousands of vessels at Sea. However, they have a pattern of movement. Sharing of white shipping data between nations through Accounting Information Systems (AIS) chains and coastal radar stations assists us to quickly recognise the odd man out of the pattern. India has taken its initiatives in this region involving several nations, towards this venture. Miscreants of good order always exploit gaps in surveillance and policing. It is these exact gaps that we need to plug.

Challenges to Ocean Management

Security challenges in the Indian Ocean are addressed by different countries in different ways. While connectivity is important for economic growth and development, we cannot lose sight of the fact that connectivity also has strategic connotations. It is, therefore, important that transnational initiatives should evolve from broad based discussions. For the Indian Ocean region to grow, we need a more effective intra-regional cooperation as well as inter-regional cooperation that will contribute to the cooperative spirit of our region.

The challenges to such cooperative structures are manifold. They can be broadly classified as challenge of maritime consensus, and challenge of maritime capacities. Both are relevant to Indian

Ocean as gleaned from the remarks of Prime Minister Modi who stated, *“Our goal is to deepen our mutual understanding on maritime challenges and strengthen our collective ability to address them.”*¹

The challenge of maritime consensus is essentially a political challenge to bring the stakeholders on the same page over matters maritime. Nations need to agree that safe oceans are for the benefit of all ensuring peaceful shipping and other economic activities. There is a rising awareness about benefit of peaceful oceans and their relevance to regional economy. However, the question of what constitutes a threat to peace and how to deal with that threat is the real challenge of consensus. This is more so in the Indian Ocean which is home to set of nations diverse in economy, race, religion and political outlook. They possess distinct political systems and world views. Some are well established democracies, whereas some are evolving politically. A wide diversity as seen in the region is a challenge to take that consensus to levels where we can act together. Dialogues such as Galle Dialogue, the Indian Ocean Dialogue, Indian Ocean Conference and USI's Annual Indo-Pacific Seminar serve to build this consensus. Similarly, exercises and exchanges lead to greater understanding between the armed forces. The recently held Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), is one example and the MILAN exercise in the Bay of Bengal are such exercises that help build trust amongst large number of partner nations.

Since most nations in the IOR have under gone a colonial stage, sea has been viewed with suspicion in the past. They were not only seen as medium through which colonisers arrived, but also as geographic barriers that challenged connectivity. However, we seem to forget that colonial powers understood the maritime domain in its entirety to include trade, economic activities, military aspects and technological imperatives. State capitals are often located in hinterland with the seas out of sight. One significant challenge for nations is to ensure that sea, even if out of sight does not remain out of mind, and that there is a domestic oceanic constituency that influences policies. Domestic consensus across party lines about cooperative structures must precede a regional consensus; otherwise policy see-saws will hinder progress.

A subset of consensus is 'trust'. When broad political consensus is developed at a strategic level, there is a need for tactical trust for sharing data networks, and interoperability. Political and strategic consensus need to evolve into tactical trust on field. Only then would cooperation become real and meaningful. The Indian Navy which is eminently represented here is better suited to address the precise technical aspects of inter-operability and tactical trust building.

There is also a challenge of capacity which is equally daunting. Most Indian Ocean littorals are developing nations. Capacities involve economy and domain skills. The state of economy of several states does not permit large scale investments in navies and coast guards which are the fundamental building blocks of cooperative maritime security. Even the richer nations of the IOR have a capacity problem in terms of requisite human capital in the domain as money can only build hardware. The exploitation of resources requires high quality human capital which is time consuming to build. Ships and networks have become sophisticated over a period raising the bar for human capital. Hence, maritime capacity building has a material as well as human intellectual domain. Nations which are ahead on the growth curve within the region need to share and assist other nations to build capacities in these domains without leading to any sense of alienation. This sharing of capacities has to permeate across government agencies, navies and maritime industry to be effective.

Regional Initiatives

Regionally there are organisations that have taken positive initiatives in management of the oceans, some of which need discussion. Most significant of them is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) which is the only pan-ocean body. The rationale behind forming IORA was to unite littoral nations on the basis of the shared Indian Ocean identity for *socio-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours*.² The organisation was established in 1997 and has 21 members and 7 dialogue partners as of date, with more lined up for membership as a testimony of its rising relevance. The IORA is primarily an economic grouping just as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). West Asia, South Asia and East Coast of Africa have the highest growth rates between 5-8 per cent, is indicating a promising role for IORA. For

the institution to become a significant player, it is only appropriate that the IORA graduates to a summit level meeting. This will give it the attention it richly deserves.

Prime Minister of Sri Lanka has dwelt upon the IORA in the first inaugural address at Indian Ocean Conference. He has taken the idea of IORA one step further and called for an Indian Ocean Order which is consensual and rule based, which must uphold freedom of navigation. There are some other significant ideas that he raised.³ His vision that only a consensual Indian Ocean Order can prevent competition from spilling over during a period of global power shift is astute and relevant. He has suggested an Indian Ocean Development Fund which can assist countries in the region address some capacity issues. An Indian Ocean Assembly, according to him can bring heads of state and a spectrum of experts together.

However, whether there should be a separate organisation or if IORA could expand its scope to include these changes is left open ended. It is my considered view that it is best to strengthen present grouping than to create a new grouping, since we cannot afford to dissipate our limited organisational energies in different directions.

The 16th Council of Ministers Meeting was held at Bali on 27 Oct 2016 with Indonesia in Chair. The focus aptly chosen by the Chair had been “Strengthening Maritime Cooperation in a Peaceful and Stable Indian Ocean”. IORA also conducts several ministerial meetings such as the one on sustained management of oceans blue economy, economy and business.

Ever since the Bengaluru meeting in 2011, IORA has dwelt on the significance of security. A study of its communiqué indicates that IORA has incrementally included security in its ambit of concerns.⁴ The Indian Ocean Dialogue, held under the aegis of IORA has entered its third edition this year. Focus areas of that dialogue will indicate that there is need to strengthen rules-based regionalism. It also highlights cooperation against piracy, illicit trafficking, maritime terrorism and illegal fishing.

A need was felt to bring the Coast Guards and Navies of the region together to share ideas since they are the preventers and responders to a crisis. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)

was, therefore, established in 2008 to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the IOR by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues and develop common understanding for possible cooperative endeavours in future. IONS has 22 members and four observers.⁵ IONS was inspired by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, with which it shares nine members. As the economic heft and significance of IOR grows, there will be a need for deeper engagements on security front. Trade and race for resources after a certain threshold may also lead to competition and tension. Before the economic competition reaches that threshold level, trust and rule based regime needs to be built between instruments of maritime security. IONS serves that exact purpose. Meaningful maritime security requires a closer liaison between the two organisations which was articulated by the IORA Perth Communique of Nov 2013 seeking *information-sharing and other activities with both civilian and non-civilian dimensions*.⁶ This requires to be taken forward. The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) in Singapore, Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) of the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) in Malaysia, the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore, Indian Navy's Maritime Shipping Information System(MSIS) are some of the information sharing initiatives that strive to make the oceans safer.

While large groups pose a wide spectrum posing greater challenge for consensus, smaller maritime security groupings such as the trilateral one between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives, may see Seychelles and Mauritius becoming its members. Such groupings contribute to maritime security in a critical maritime space.

At these maritime conferences it is but natural to focus on issues maritime. However, to forget or gloss over the challenges that issues such as trans-national terrorism, problems of unresolved borders and basing of foreign naval assets have on maritime security architecture would be short-sighted. After all, maritime strategy is a sub-set of national strategy.

Indian Approaches

Prime Minister Modi clearly enunciated the Indian vision for Indian Ocean Region in March 2015 while visiting Mauritius. The vision

had four key pillars:-

- (a) To safeguard our mainland and islands, defend our interests; ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean, and make available our capabilities to others.
- (b) Deepen economic and security cooperation with our maritime neighbours and strengthen their capacities.
- (c) Envisage collective action and cooperation with our maritime neighbours and strengthen their capacities. This would promote peace and security and respond to emergencies
- (d) Seek a more integrated and cooperative future for the region that enhances sustainable development.

The Indian approach to regionalism is defined by the word SAGAR, which means ocean in most Indian languages and when expanded, reads Security and Growth for All in the Region. More than sixty per cent of India's external trade is with countries that are on the littorals of Indo-Pacific Region, besides 90 per cent of its global trade passing through it.⁷

India recognises that its own destiny is intertwined with other nations in the region. Identifying connectivity as the most important facet of development, Indian initiatives such as Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multimodal Project, Chabahar Port project are aimed at improving regional connectivity. India has invested close to US \$25 bn in loans and grants in the region. On the domestic front the Sagarmala project is a US \$10 bn project aimed at better domestic port based network. This is aimed at triggering a new phase of growth. Being a large economy with a long coastline, this investment can also improve connectivity in the neighbourhood. The hinterland connectivity is also being improved by highway networks and industrial corridors. India has cultural projects of connectivity such as Mausam which uses the recall value of monsoon that created an Indian Ocean System of interaction since time immemorial. This is apart from its multilateral commitments.

Conclusion

The essence of an Indian sense of responsibility to the oceans was aptly summed up by Prime Minister Modi in a recent speech in Mauritius, wherein he stated *“the blue chakra or wheel in India's*

national flag represents the potential of Blue Revolution or the Ocean Economy. That is how central the Ocean Economy is to us.” Peaceful oceans are essential for any economic activity to thrive. Regionally, nations need to cooperate more than ever for maintenance of peace. The process of political trust building regarding maritime affairs must be matched by cooperation between navies and other maritime constabulary arms such as the coast guards. It is such a two tier process that can ensure that ocean economies, and linked terrestrial economic systems of this region grow to its true potential. However, the challenges that may arise due to Naval presence of foreign navies in the Indian Ocean region need to be taken note of.

In conclusion, I would like to say that to foster a robust cooperative effective strategic maritime partnership, India stands ready to work with all nations to create a prosperous, secure and developed Indian Ocean Region. I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Sri Lankan Navy, for conducting such an annual conference which is a part of the strategist’s calendar across the region. Conferences such as these, serve the cause of maritime security most eminently by building trust among us all!

Endnotes

¹ “Text of the PM’s Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda,” [Www.narendramodi.in](http://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-the-pms-remarks-on-the-commissioning-of-coast-ship-barracuda-2954), accessed October 28, 2016, <http://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-the-pms-remarks-on-the-commissioning-of-coast-ship-barracuda-2954>.

² “Background - IORA - Indian Ocean Rim Association,” accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.iora.net/about-us/background.aspx>.

³ India Foundation, H.E Mr Ranil Wickremesinghe at Indian Ocean Conference 2016.

⁴ “Communiqué - IORA - Indian Ocean Rim Association,” accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.iora.net/documents/communique.aspx>.

⁵ “Member’s Country | Indian Ocean Naval Symposium,” accessed November 12, 2015, http://ions.gov.in/member_country.

⁶ “Communiqué - IORA - Indian Ocean Rim Association,” accessed November 4, 2015, <http://www.iora.net/documents/communique.aspx>.

⁷ “India and the Indian Ocean Region: The New Geo-Economics,” accessed October 29, 2016, <http://www.indiafoundation.in/articles-and-papers/india-and-the-indian-ocean-region-the-new-geo-economics-by-sanjaya-baru.html>.