

India's Calibrated Response to the Threats in the Western Indian Ocean Region

Introduction

A slew of drone and missile attacks and vessel hijacking attempts in the Red Sea and the region abutting the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait infused apprehension in the minds of several economies. The turmoil in the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR), especially the Houthis' attack on the commerce and trade shipments passing through the Red Sea and the piracy attempts off the Somali Coast, have ripple effects on the economic lifelines of countries miles away from that region. The *raison d'être* delineated by the Houthis was the support to Hamas against Israeli attacks, which were carried out in response to Hamas' Oct 7 attack on Israel.

Interstate trade felt reverberations as a consequence of adventures in the WIOR. According to Jan Hoffmann, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's head of trade logistics, the Suez Canal handles 80 per cent of the global movement of goods.^[1] Owing to the recent surge in piracy and drone attacks, the Suez Canal is witnessing a nosedive in commercial activities.

Aligning Interests, Differing Responses

Recently, the United States (US) and India have emerged as the two big powers in the WIOR in response to the Houthis attacks and piracy issues. These two 'Natural Allies' converge on the need to preserve the safe and free movements of commercial vessels and ensure that the Sea Lanes of Communications remain untrammelled by any actor-state or non-state. Beyond the immediate reasons, they have long been unified by a common denominator, the Chinese military presence in the region. Albeit the two powers are in unison in preserving the order in the seas, they have quite distinct approaches, thanks to the complex geopolitical and diplomatic realities, to such ends.

Though India has overwhelmingly reacted to cases of piracy and hijacking attempts in the Western Arabian Ocean, it has been treading cautiously on matters related to Houthi attacks. Despite the Indian Navy's unprecedentedly large naval military posture stretching from the North and Central Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Navy has, so far, refrained from attacking the Iran-backed Houthis and their operating bases. This does not mean that India is sans capabilities or strategy. The complex political and diplomatic realities in the region warrant a cautious approach. India has refused to join the US-led 'Operation Prosperity Guardian', which has been directly involved in bombing the operating sites of Houthis in Yemen. The US has largely been perceived, in the Middle East, as a supporter of Israel in its war against Hamas. Since Houthis' attacks in the Gulf of Aden are seen as an extension of the Israel-Hamas conflict, this has led to ideological and political complexities for several states.

Despite the Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh's stern warning that India will track down those behind the attacks on M V Chem Pluto 'Even from the depths of seas'^[2], India has not explicitly named Houthis or Iran, unlike the US which has blatantly accused Iran behind such attacks, let alone attacking Houthis directly. At most, the Indian Navy is working only complementarily to the 'Operation Prosperity Guardian'. While the US and its partners have bombarded multiple operating sites of Houthis, India has been active in responding to distress calls from ships under attack in the Red Sea.

Though India has a credibly overwhelming naval force in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), it still lacks a system-shaping capability like that of great powers, such as the US. India cannot afford to meddle in an ideologically surcharged domestic environment of West Asia. Despite having a formidable military capability in South Asia, India, at times, has made concessions to its smaller neighbours, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, in order not to reify the 'Big Brother' image. Unlike the US, India's geographic position has compelled India to refrain from publically preaching human rights lessons to the Burmese military junta in the post-2021 period. It has also been reported, on the contrary, that India has supplied arms and related materials to the junta to engage with the latter.^[3] Undoubtedly, India aspires to become a *Vishwaguru* (a global leader), however, the road to such status would unlikely deviate from the principles of pragmatism.

On the issue of Houthi attacks, Abhijit Singh, a retired naval officer at the Observer Research Foundation, opined, 'Indian decision-makers [...] feel compelled to avoid participation in a military endeavour meant to fight a politically-backed group in control of vast parts of Yemen'.^[4] India's Maritime Strategy (2015) acknowledges that sea-borne terrorism has expanded and developed in new manners, which 'Poses a serious and continuing threat', with the prospects for asymmetric and hybrid warfare.^[5] Though India possesses a credible deterrent force in the IOR, it does not want to invite home a group of radical militants fighting on ideological lines.

Moreover, at a time when small island states, such as Maldives, are trying to woo China at the expense of India in the IOR and when Iran is alienated by the US and its allies, India cannot choose sides between Iran and the US. Hence, rather than a blame game or any squabble, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar diplomatically conveyed Indian concerns with his Iranian counterpart: "[...] there have also been recently a perceptible increase in threats to the safety of maritime commercial traffic in the important part of the Indian Ocean. [...] We have even seen some attacks in the vicinity of India [...] a direct bearing on India's energy and economic interests. [...] this must be clearly recognised".^[6]

India cannot ignore the primacy of Iran's Chabahar port in its broader strategy to connect to the Central Asian states and counter Chinese influence in the IOR. Recently, India's Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri, at the 6th Regional Dialogue of Security Councils, urged countries of the Central Asian regions to use the port of Chabahar to enhance connectivity and trade with India and other states in the world.^[7] This becomes even more pronounced when the India-Middle East Economic Corridor's future seems bleaker owing to the ongoing Israel-Hamas Conflict. It is no surprise that why S. Jaishankar highlighted 'India's interest in benefitting from Iran's unique geographical position to access markets in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Eurasia', the need for 'Energising the International North South Transport Corridor', and the continued relevance of the Chabahar port.^[8]

Towards an Inclusive and Pragmatic Approach

India and the US share strategic convergence when it comes to the Indo-Pacific construct. However, there are significant divergences in how they see this region. Geography plays an important role in establishing distinct outlooks and interests in the region. This is most prominent concerning Iran. While the US, under the Trump administration, completely alienated Iran, India invariably walks a tightrope in including Iran in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

India's vision of the Indo-Pacific envisions an inclusive region and has sought to include Russia, Iran, and, at times, even China. India's geographic position requires inclusive, engaging, and multipronged partnerships with states of myriad kinds in the region. Speaking at the 7th Indian Ocean Conference, S. Jaishankar emphasised, "Because the challenges [conflict, threats to maritime traffic, piracy, and terrorism] and responsibilities are so complex and multidimensional, it is incumbent [...] to address them at various levels. [...] in the last decade, we [India] have been very open and engaging [...] since 2014, India has joined or initiated 36 plurilateral groups in different domains".^[9]

It is noticeable that the Indian Navy, by the conclusion of 2020, shifted from the phrase 'Net security provider' or 'Net provider of security' to the term 'Preferred security partnership'.^[10] The former entails a more expansive, exclusivist, and interventionist approach, while the latter signals 'The beginning of an inclusive and minilateral/multilateral, approach to maritime security cooperation'.^[11] The Indian Navy acknowledged that mutual collaboration with partner states would be more impactful in the backdrop of Chinese influence in the IOR. In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, when India was wary of any extra-regional naval presence in the IOR, India today is enthusiastic about cooperation with foreign naval forces to curtail Chinese influence in the region.^[12] Hence, in a one-of-a-kind event, India has invited warships from the US, Russia, and Iran, along with other states, to its Milan joint naval exercise which is set to begin on 19 Feb.^[13] This would mark the convergence of states at odds with each other, geopolitically, and portrays India's inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific.

Though India has tilted towards the West for a few decades, especially owing to the Chinese factor, it continues to balance multiple partnerships, sometimes at odds with one another. This underlies India's sheer pragmatic approach. Therefore, S. Jaishankar conveyed to his Iranian counterpart "As a strong advocate of Iran's joining [to BRICS], India was particularly pleased with this outcome. We also work closely together in the SCO [...]"^[14] Thus, India's passive response to the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea delineates an assiduous approach to the emerging situation, allowing itself the 'time and space to respond in a manner that allows it to maximize its own interests'.^[15]

Endnotes

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