

Sinking Of IRIS Dena And Rules-Based Order

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)

Introduction

In the early hours of 04 Mar, a Mark-48 heavyweight torpedo struck the Islamic Republic of Iran Ship (IRIS) Dena, a naval ship, beneath her keel. The vessel was sailing in international waters approximately 20 nautical miles south of Galle, Sri Lanka. She was on her return voyage to Iran after participating in MILAN 2026, a multinational naval exercise hosted by the Indian Navy at Visakhapatnam. She was reportedly unarmed in accordance with the exercise's return-voyage protocol.¹

IRIS Dena reportedly had about 130 crew members aboard. Of these, 87 are confirmed dead, with 84 bodies recovered and now being repatriated to Iran by Sri Lanka, while another 32 were rescued. The vessel was located approximately 1,700 nautical miles from Iran's nearest coastline and, in relation to Operation Epic Fury, more than 1,350 nautical miles from the nearest active theatre.

Almost immediately after the incident, IRIS Dena transmitted a distress call, triggering a large-scale Search and Rescue (SAR) operation involving the Sri Lankan Navy, Coast Guard, and air force, as well as Indian assets. Although they arrived quickly, the vessel reportedly sank within two to three minutes of the torpedo's impact.

CBS News, citing several officials, reported that the submarine responsible for the sinking was the USS Charlotte of the United States Navy, which allegedly left the area without undertaking SAR operations.² The Mark-48 torpedo carries a warhead of roughly 650 pounds of high explosive capable of breaking a large vessel's keel through under-keel detonation.³ Video footage suggests the submarine may have fired from a range of three to four kms at around 05:08 local time. The Sri Lankan Navy, subsequently, recovered survivors and bodies from the water.

The sinking of an unarmed IRIS Dena, following participation in a multinational naval exercise and occurring within a neutral state's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), raises serious questions about the credibility of the so-called rules-based international order.

Pete Hegseth's Remarks

Pete Hegseth, the United States (US) Secretary of Defense, confirmed the strike during a Pentagon briefing, releasing black-and-white footage of a Mark-48 torpedo hitting the frigate's stern.

"An American submarine sank an Iranian warship that thought it was safe in international waters", he said, calling it a "Quiet death".⁴

He was describing the torpedo strike. But the question arises: was he also, perhaps unintentionally, hinting at the 'quiet death' of the rules-based international order that Western powers had spent nearly eight decades building after World War II? This quiet death signals more than a military assessment—it points to a doctrine: that the US believes it can strike anywhere, against anyone, and frame it as dominance rather than legality.

This operation was not designed for the world, or even for the country at large; it was designed for a domestic political constituency.

Moreover, independent polls conducted after the strikes on Iran showed that roughly 60 percent of Americans opposed the attacks, with support concentrated mainly among the political base of President Donald Trump.⁵

The Pattern is Revealing

On Thursday, 26 Feb, Iranian and American negotiators concluded what Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi described as the most intense rounds of negotiations and agreed to reconvene in Vienna the following week. Both sides reported progress. However, two days later, the bombs fell.

Oman's Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, who had brokered months of diplomatic efforts, stated that "Active and serious negotiations" had been destroyed.⁶ The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had also repeatedly reported that it had found no verified evidence of an active Iranian nuclear weapons programme, a position broadly consistent with the earlier US intelligence assessments.⁷

Iran was bombed while it was negotiating, and its Supreme Leader was killed. Hours later, a missile struck the Shajareh Tayyebbeh Girls' Elementary School in Minab, Hormozgan province, killing between 165 and 180 people, most of them girls aged seven to twelve.

The school, separated from a nearby Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) facility by a wall constructed between 2013 and 2016, became the focus of an Al Jazeera investigation. The report suggested either the targeting database was over a decade out of date—an example of grave negligence—or the strike was deliberate, designed to produce maximum psychological shock.⁸

These are not three separate incidents. They are three expressions of a single reality: when rules become inconvenient, they are set aside.

The United Nations (UN) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization condemned the attack, as did the UN Secretary-General. The Pentagon did not publicly respond to requests for comment.

Five days later, IRIS Dena was struck during an unarmed transit. Former Indian Chief of the Navy Staff Admiral Arun Prakash described the sinking as "Senseless and

inflammatory”.⁹ Former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal also observed that the US had “Ignored India’s sensitivities”, as the ship was present in these waters because of India’s invitation.¹⁰

India’s International Fleet Review (IFR) 2026 drew warships from 74 nations. Navies participating in such exercises will now question whether attendance could expose them to attack once they leave port.

Commodore Uday Bhaskar remarked that despite the diplomatic discomfort for India, the incident illustrates the reach of American undersea warfare capability and the continuing importance of technological maritime dominance.¹¹

Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baqaei described the attack as a “War crime” and a violation of international law.¹² Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi called it an “Atrocity at sea” and warned that the US would “Bitterly regret” the action.¹³

The Laws of Naval Warfare

The San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea, adopted on 12 Jun 1994, requires precaution before attack, verification of military necessity, and respect for neutral waters.¹⁴ Sri Lanka reportedly received no warning, IRIS Dena carried no ordnance, and no alternative to sinking the vessel was attempted or explained.

When the USS Charlotte fired and departed without conducting SAR operations, the action appears inconsistent with obligations under Geneva Convention II, which requires parties to a maritime engagement to search for and collect the wounded, sick, and shipwrecked.

Article 18 of the 1949 Geneva Convention II for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded, Sick, and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea states:

“After each engagement, Parties to the conflict shall, without delay, take all possible measures to search for and collect the shipwrecked, wounded, and sic”¹⁵

In this case, it was the Sri Lanka Navy that carried out those operations.

For nearly 80 years, the rules-based order rested on a central claim that powerful states had accepted constraints on their behaviour and would enforce those same constraints on others. Yet, when the most powerful actor in the system decides those constraints no longer apply to itself, there remains no enforcement mechanism, no appeal, and no remedy.

The UN, constrained by the veto power of the major powers, remains largely ineffective in such circumstances.¹⁶

History always offers parallels. During the Falklands War in 1982, the British submarine His or Her Majesty's Ship (HMS) Conqueror torpedoed the Argentine cruiser Armada de la República Argentina (ARA) General Belgrano outside the declared exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands. Critics argued that the cruiser was sailing away from the combat area; Britain maintained that it remained a lawful target during wartime.¹⁷

Conclusion

In purely military terms, the strike destroyed a single ship. Strategically, however, it may represent something larger: an assertion of maritime dominance and deterrence. Yet strategy rarely exists in isolation from political consequences. The location of the attack—near Sri Lanka and along critical Indian Ocean shipping routes—raises concerns about the geographical expansion of the conflict.

Until recently, most confrontations between Iran and its adversaries were confined to the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and the Red Sea. The Indian Ocean now appears drawn into the strategic theatre.

What emerges from these events is not a rules-based order but a power-based order, which stands unilateral and unaccountable. The Geneva Conventions II, the San Remo Manual, the UN Charter, and diplomatic conventions protecting negotiations were all applicable to the recent events. Yet, none appear to have been respected.

As Thucydides wrote in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*:

“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.

Endnotes

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Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

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