



THE SECURITY OF THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: DELIBERATING THE REGIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

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The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean after the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Its strategic importance lies in the fact that some of the busiest SLOCs pass through the Indian Ocean and it also connects the two larger oceans. The region is rich in natural resources and approximately two-thirds of the world trade passes through the Indian Ocean, making it the most important maritime trade route. However, it has as many as five major chokepoints¹. The global change in the strategic environment due to the subtle transformation in the international order has its implications for the region. The regional order in the IOR, too, is moving towards multi-polarity as several countries are economically and militarily more resilient now than before. Moreover, the region is too large for any one country to rule.

Despite the economic advantage that the Indian Ocean provides to some of its coastal countries, the region is mired in security challenges that threaten the sovereignty of the

states and also affects the lives of one-third of the world's population that resides in the Indian Ocean Region. This necessitates understanding the nature of security threats before seeking for a pragmatic and workable security framework/s within the region. The complexity of the insecurities has become multifarious with the respective security interests of each of the stakeholder nations in the IOR.

Traditional versus Non-traditional security threats in IOR

The Indian Ocean faces security threats from both traditional and non-traditional sources. The region is surrounded by the most number of developing and under-developed countries, apart from few developed countries. The presence of a large number of impoverished countries has made the region susceptible to security threats like smuggling of arms and drugs, human trafficking, illegal immigration, piracy and

terrorism that adversely affect a large number of people. Global warming and climate change have exacerbated the natural disasters like tsunamis and typhoons each year, affecting lives and infrastructure of already struggling economies in the IOR.

In addition to the above mentioned non-traditional threats, there are growing traditional threats that sovereign states of the region face owing to the inter-state conflicts and presence of extra-regional states within the military paradigm in the IOR. The intractable conflicts between India-Pakistan, India-China, South and North Korea have introduced nuclear weapons in the region over the past decades. Moreover, China's recent quest to develop as a maritime power and modernisation of its military forces has pushed the insecurity button among the neighbouring countries even harder. China's presence and behaviour in the South of China Sea have been bolstered by its port developments around the Indian Ocean rim countries, e.g. Africa (Djibouti), Pakistan (Gwadar), Myanmar (Kyaukpyu) and Sri Lanka (Hambantota) and is now a concern for other countries in the region. India is also concerned about its security as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a part of China's One Belt One Road initiative, would pass illegally through its territory in PoK.

Other security challenges include the recent Chinese nuclear submarine forays in the Indian Ocean and also its sale of submarines to India's

neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh². Notably, submarines are widely regarded as 'offensive weapons'.

Offensive versus Defensive Security Framework

The varying levels of security threats and absence of any over-arching security regime supervising security aspects give impetus to the formation of intra-regional alliances. However, the nature of security framework needs to locate its role in the region. According to Glenn H. Snyder, there are two reasons for a State to form alliances when it is faced with a security dilemma. First, when a state is dissatisfied with the existing state of its security, it forms alliances in order to bolster its security. Second, when a state is in doubt about the reliability of existing allies coming to its aid, it decides to court another ally or allies.

However, this raises a pertinent question: 'Will the nature of the regional security regimes be offensive or defensive'? Offensive security regimes are formed in a region/ or among a group of countries when the threat is common and known to all the parties. Formation of NATO is such an example. On the other hand, when the threat is not persistent and known, yet affects all the countries in the region, a defensive security regime comes to play. Countering threats like environmental disasters, piracy, drug smuggling and human trafficking in the Indian Ocean does not need weaponisation of the region but

solutions like the mutual exchange of information, cooperative mechanisms by the counterpart ministries of several states, backed by some operational institutional framework, that would ensure the effectiveness of the defensive security regime.

Current Security framework: Indian Ocean Rim Association

Indian Ocean Region has an apex regional institution – Indian Ocean Rim Association, or IORA³ – to meet the quantity and scale of the challenges, together with its importance as a source of raw materials and the location of shipping lanes that are of vital importance to the global economy. Established in 1997, the charter of IORA⁴ focuses on four priority areas: maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; and disaster risk management.

However, there are some inherent issues with the current framework. Several countries such as Pakistan, Maldives, Saudi Arabia and Myanmar are not a part of IORA. As India and Pakistan share difficult bilateral relations that led to obstructing of SAARC meetings last year, any IORA security framework might also face the same problem. Similarly, Iran might not be enthusiastic about Saudi Arabia's presence in the IORA. Therefore, for expansion of the membership (to the IORA), clarity of objectives and understanding among the member states

with regards to the threats in the IOR would be required.

Nonetheless, dealing with the traditional security threats might be even more difficult. China's expansion and presence in IOR is seen as a security threat by India and Australia, whereas Sri Lanka does not support Beijing's military deployment in the region. On the other hand, Japan and the US see Chinese activities as a threat to Freedom of Navigation and concept of Open Seas. The divergence in the threat perceptions among these member and observer states of IORA calls for a new and innovative approach for addressing traditional security concerns.

Conclusion

As the talks for pondering the security in the Indian Ocean are shaping up and the threats are being classified as traditional and non-traditional, there is a need to devise the security frameworks accordingly. Although India has already initiated projects such as MAUSAM⁵ and Security and Growth for All in the Region (or SAGAR) for cultural exchanges and communication with its maritime neighbours, a regional security policy framework to provide safer sea lanes for maritime trade and security needs more deliberations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹The major choke points include Bab el Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, the Lombok Strait, the Strait of Malacca and the Palk Strait.

²*Defense News*, "Purchase of Chinese Subs by Bangladesh 'An Act of Provocation' Toward India". Published on 23 Nov 2016. Accessed online on 18 February 2017. URL: <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/purchase-of-chinese-subs-by-bangladesh-an-act-of-provocation-toward-india>

³ The IORA with 20 member States and six observer States is one of the most important regional platforms to carry forward the interests of member states to cooperate on development in the region.

⁴ *Indian Ocean Rim Association website*. Accessed online on 21 February 2017 URL: <http://www.iora.net/charter.aspx>

⁵ The endeavour of Project 'Mausam'- Mausam: Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes is to position itself at two levels: at the macro level, it aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns; while at the micro level, the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu