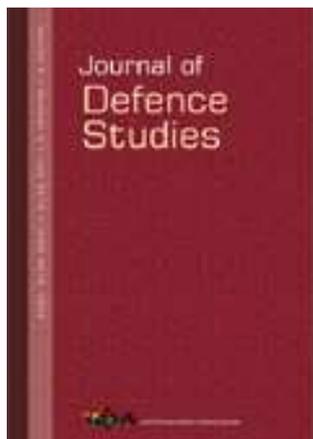


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Addressing Maritime Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

A Case for Synergising Naval Capacities towards Collective Benefits

Kamlesh K. Agnihotri*

The vastness and diversity of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its littorals, and difference in the latter's overall view of regional security, presents a broad spectrum of challenges therein. The maritime capacities of most littoral states are not strong enough to individually address these challenges. However, synergised response strategies, appropriately regulated by one or two collectively mandated apex bodies, would greatly help in managing regional maritime security. The existing maritime cooperative initiatives in IOR, like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), have shown great promise and potential. Countries like India and Australia, major players in both these constructs, can possibly rally other IOR littorals into leveraging their maritime capacities under these pan-regional fora by mutual agreement. Concurrently, both initiatives could find congruence in their maritime security visions, so as to create a collaborative local environment for collective benefits without dependence on extra-regional players.

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...it is in the maritime domain that our [Indian Ocean littoral states'] hopes and aspirations of coming together as a strong and united region have their greatest chance of being realised.

– A.K. Antony, Former Indian Defence Minister¹

The oceans, as global highways of connectivity, have been the principal means for propagation of political, social, cultural, economic and military influence beyond continental masses since recorded history. European countries—particularly the English, French, Spanish, Dutch and the Portuguese—buoyed on by the Industrial Revolution and associated technological ascendancy, used these oceanic highways to project power and influence across the oceans into the American, Asian and African continental landmass like never before. While the Americans managed to resist and then rid themselves of European stranglehold in a reasonable timeframe, the hapless Asian and African societies, totally overwhelmed by superior maritime capabilities of the Europeans, were colonised and ruled for the next two centuries. It is worthwhile to note the spatial connect in this context as major colonisation dynamics were played out in the IOR. The Indian Ocean was also used by the Europeans as a means of transit to explore, influence and colonise more societies in the Western Pacific and enable their subsequent sustenance.

Notwithstanding the comprehensive exploitation of human and material resources of the colonised world, some European powers—particularly the British—did establish technology-facilitated infrastructure locally, to enable better administration and ease of business. These included railways, highways, ports, shipbuilding yards and the like. Capacity building of this infrastructure also progressed as colonial rule consolidated itself. In the maritime context, capacity building included setting up of coastal security and naval forces; equipping them with ships, aircraft and associated gear; training human resource to man them; supporting them through shore facilities like berthing jetties and repair yards; and integrating them to mainstream governing structure for gainful employment. This inherently available foundational base, when most IOR littorals gained independence post-World War II, provided the requisite springboard for development of strong maritime capacities. Some success stories in this regard—although modest in most cases—are those of India, Singapore, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia.²

Against this backdrop, the article dwells on maritime capacity building of major IOR littoral states and examines existing and ongoing maritime cooperative endeavours in the regional and sub-regional context.

It recommends means and modalities for synergising such capacities in spite of certain limiting factors—which may tend to inhibit wholesome cooperation—so as to strive towards a mutually beneficial end state for the whole region. Finally, it recommends means and modalities for synergising such capacities in spite of such limiting dynamics, so as to strive towards a mutually beneficial end state for the whole region.

MARITIME CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE INDIAN OCEAN LITTORALS

Most of the Indian Ocean littoral states do not have naval and maritime law enforcement capabilities commensurate to the requirement of maintaining security of vast areas under their jurisdiction. Notable exceptions include Australia, India, Singapore and Pakistan to a large extent; and Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia and South Africa to a lesser extent. This fact gets amply highlighted on comparing major naval holdings of Indian Ocean littoral countries (see Table 1).³

While the ‘capability-requirement deficit’ is unfavourably placed for most states, the situation for Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar and Comoros is particularly alarming. A representative ratio of about 2,905 square kilometres (sq km) of sea area to guard for every sq km of land territory in case of Seychelles, and quite the similar ratio (1:3,078) for Maldives,⁴ brings out the enormity of task at hand. This inherent limitation, perforce, leaves a vast swath of the Indian Ocean unmonitored. The potential for exploitation of these scarcely surveilled ocean spaces for unlawful activities by non-state actors has become a matter of primary concern for the littoral states.

Since IOR littoral states just cannot address myriad maritime security challenge by themselves, it becomes imperative that they synergise their maritime capacities for achieving effective outcomes. If that be the bottom line, it would indeed be worthwhile to look at naval resources at their disposal (Table 1). While it may not be feasible to discuss recent developments in naval capabilities of each state, significant maritime capacity-building programmes of some major Indian Ocean littorals do merit separate mention.

India’s Growing Maritime Capacity

With inherent attributes of mobility, sustenance, preparedness, reach and sealift capability, the Indian Navy is adequately armed to address a broad spectrum of challenges in the Indian Ocean. Its conventional capabilities have undergone a sea change with acquisition of the aircraft

Table I Broad Naval Holdings of the Indian Ocean Littoral States

| <i>Serial No.</i> | <i>Country</i> | <i>Major Ships</i> | <i>Corvettes/Patrol Craft</i> | <i>Submarines</i> |
|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Australia | 15 | 15 | 6 |
| 2 | Bangladesh | 5 | 55 | — |
| 3 | Egypt | 10 | 48 | 4 |
| 4 | Eritrea | — | 12 | — |
| 5 | India* | 23 | 55 | 14 |
| 6 | Indonesia | 6 | 67 | 2 |
| 7 | Iran | 4 | 25 | 13 |
| 8 | Iraq | — | 22 | — |
| 9 | Israel | 3 | 55 | 5 |
| 10 | Kenya | — | 6 | — |
| 11 | Madagascar | — | 6 | — |
| 12 | Malaysia | 2 | 45 | 2 |
| 13 | Mauritius | — | 5 | — |
| 14 | Myanmar | 6 | 55 | — |
| 15 | Oman | 5 | 16 | — |
| 16 | Pakistan | 11 | 13 | 5 |
| 17 | Saudi Arabia | 7 | 13 | — |
| 18 | Seychelles | — | 6 | — |
| 19 | Singapore | 6 | 17 | 4 |
| 20 | South Africa | 4 | 7 | 3 |
| 21 | Sri Lanka | 2 | 27 | — |
| 22 | Tanzania | — | 12 | — |
| 23 | Thailand | 10 | 18 | — |
| 24 | UAE | 3 | 22 | — |
| 25 | Yemen | — | 14 | — |

Source: Author's compilation. Data from *Jane's Fighting Ships 2013–14*, n. 3.

Note: * includes 'Vikramaditya' aircraft carrier and two nuclear powered submarines ('Chakra' and 'Arihant') also.

carrier *Vikramaditya*, MiG29K aircraft, and the *Chakra* nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN); and indigenous construction of Kolkata class destroyers, Talwar and Shivalik class frigates, Kamorta class anti-submarine warfare (ASW) ships, and Sumitra class offshore patrol vessels.⁵ In fact, the Indian Navy's amphibious fleet, comprising various-sized landing ships from the Jalashwa landing platform dock (LPD), Magar class large landing ships tanks (LST[L]), Cheetah class medium landing ships tanks (LST[M]) to numerous landing craft utility (LCUs), forms the mainstay of its preparedness for rendering humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in the aftermath

of natural disasters. Long-range maritime reconnaissance and patrol aircraft, including the recently inducted P8I multi-mission platforms, are huge force multipliers. These assets have enabled the Indian Navy to provide extensive HADR in and beyond the region. For instance, post the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004, a total of 36 ships, a large number of aircraft and more than 5,000 naval personnel were deployed for relief mission not only on India's east coast and island territories, but also to Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia.⁶ The April 2015 evacuation of more than 3,000 Indian and foreign personnel from Yemen by three Indian Navy ships under severe operational constraints, as part of 'Operation Rahat', demonstrated India's HADR capability in ample measure.⁷

Australian Capacity Building

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has been in transition for close to a decade-and-half now, so as to address the demands for future development and role requirement.⁸ Induction of the Hobart class multi-role destroyers with transformational weapons and sensors, Collins class submarines, and Armidale class fast patrol boats to its existing inventory will further augment conventional warfare capacity. A huge boost to the declining amphibious capabilities of the RAN will be provided by two Canberra class landing helicopter dock (LHD) amphibious assault ships, each of which can transport and support up to 1,000 embarked troops.⁹ These ships could really augment HADR capacities in the Indian Ocean littoral. An Australian maritime analyst, in fact, foresees that a joint force built around these amphibious platforms would be able to provide '...robust capability for improved effects in humanitarian and disaster relief; assistance to friendly nations; joint military exercise; evacuation operations, presence and preventive diplomacy.'¹⁰

Singapore's Naval Modernisation

Singapore, which sees deterrence and diplomacy as 'two mainstays' of its state policy, is the largest military spender amongst the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. Its defence expenses accounted for about one-quarter of the national budget in 2012,¹¹ and the trend continues for succeeding years too. Much of this modernisation is directed towards its navy, wherein early-warning aircraft, air tankers and submarine rescue ships have been inducted. Six French-made Formidable class frigates, Challenger class submarines, and numerous fast missile-armed patrol vessels form the core of Republic of Singapore

Navy (RSN). Singapore also has an LST(L) that is a force-multiplier for HADR operations.

Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai Navies¹²

Since these countries have their coastline in both the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, their naval assets are also divided across two seaboard. However, their naval capacity accretion does merit mention, as mobile platforms can easily be moved to either side based on requirement. Indonesia contracted for purchase of three 209 class submarines from South Korea in 2012, in addition to having acquired four Sigma class corvettes from Holland in 2009. Malaysia received two Scorpene submarines from France in 2009, followed by six Kedah class corvettes from Germany in 2010. While Thailand does not have submarines, it is actively considering their acquisition. Its aircraft carrier, Chakri Naruebet, though currently utilised in very limited operational role, can be used extensively for HADR.

Other Navies of Significance—Potential Cooperative Resources

The Egyptian Navy with 10 major combatants, four submarines and numerous patrol vessels has the inherent capacity to contribute to mitigation of regional maritime challenges. However, this 'inward-looking' navy has rarely ventured beyond its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).¹³ If Egypt can be convinced to play a greater role in areas beyond its immediate maritime periphery in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, it will relieve the pressure on other littoral navies. These, in turn, can then lay greater focus on other critical areas, for instance, further seawards in the Arabian Sea, as also in and around EEZs of countries like Seychelles, Mauritius and Maldives.

The Iranian Navy, which is quite well organised and equipped—with a large number of fast-attack craft, Kilo class submarines and some vintage frigates—has shown the propensity to demonstrate 'out-of-area' capability by deploying ships 'off and on' in the Gulf of Aden since 2009; and sending a frigate and a replenishment vessel to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean in 2011.¹⁴ Better political integration of Iran with rest of the world, particularly after the nuclear rapprochement of sorts with the P5+1 talks, could be a huge enabler in leveraging of its maritime capacity towards cooperative outcomes.

The Pakistani Navy also has a substantial three-dimensional naval force, built largely through progressive acquisition from Western

countries and recent inductions from China. Vast experience gained in inter-operability by participating in joint missions with coalition forces and hosting 'Aman' series of multilateral exercises can be harnessed towards cooperative maritime security endeavours in the IOR.

COOPERATIVE MECHANISMS IN THE IOR

While IOR littorals possess certain maritime capacities individually, the regional aggregate amounts to quite a sizeable capability. This comprehensive whole could be suitably exploited by a central coordinating mechanism so as to achieve effective results with optimum utilisation of resources. The IOR littorals have established some such mechanisms, though the level and scope of cooperation in each of them is different. While most of the IOR littoral states are also members of various extra-regional maritime security mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); few mechanisms, as mentioned next, do comprise only IOR resident countries.

Anti-piracy Collaboration

The Malacca Strait Security Initiative (MSSI) was started by collaborative efforts of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia in July 2004 when piracy assumed threatening proportions there. It presently encompasses comprehensive measures, including joint warship patrols (Operation MALSINDO), aerial surveillance (Eyes in the Sky) and collation of radar-based surface picture (SURPIC). This sharing of maritime capacities under MSSI has reduced piracy incidents significantly from the Malacca and Singapore Straits area, notwithstanding the recent upturn, albeit in a different form and shape.¹⁵

At the other extremity, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off Somali coast was contained by combining maritime capacities of both, the IOR littorals as well as extra-regional stakeholders. While extra-regional groupings like the United States (US)-led Combined Task Force (CTF) 151, the European Union (EU) Naval Forces' 'Operation Atalanta' and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 'Ocean Shield' have countered piracy by sustained deployment, the IOR littorals have contributed in no small measure. While countries like Australia and Pakistan have been operating as part of CTF 151, India, Iran, Indonesia and Singapore have mounted independent anti-piracy escort missions—although in close coordination with other multi-national forces for better economy of effort. The effectiveness of this endeavour, which lasted for

seven years, can be measured from the fact that incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Aden have plummeted from a peak of 117 in 2009 to just four in 2014.¹⁶ In fact, success of this effort can be an ideal test case for demonstrating the favourable outcome by synergising individual maritime capacities.

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

The erstwhile Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) came into being in March 1997 as a platform for socio-economic cooperation between countries located in the Indian Ocean. The body, comprising 20 IOR countries and rechristened as IORA in 2010, has the promotion of trade, investment and economic cooperation as its main objective. However, it now recognises that trouble-free trade flows, contingent on assured maritime safety and security, are important prerequisites for economic well-being of the region. Accordingly, the IORA Council of Ministers, in its joint communiqué of 09 October 2014, committed to ‘...address shared maritime and security challenges that threaten sea lines of communication and transportation in the Indian Ocean, notably piracy and terrorism.’¹⁷ The acknowledgement of maritime security imperative by the IORA Council, for the first time ever, opens immense possibilities for leveraging maritime capacities in the region.

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)

The IONS initiative was launched in February 2008 with the aim of attaining ‘...mutually beneficial maritime security outcomes within the Indian Ocean’¹⁸, when India hosted the inaugural meeting of Navy Chiefs¹⁹ of 27 IOR littoral states. Admiral Sureesh Mehta, then Chief of the Indian Navy and principal host, termed it as ‘...the first new and significant international cooperative construct of the twenty-first century.’²⁰ This initiative has a wider membership base as compared to IORA,²¹ and has gathered momentum through inclusive participation over last seven years. Strengthening belief in its potential to deliver on collaborative maritime security endeavours is quite evident from unanimous endorsement of the IONS ‘Charter of Business’ in March 2014. The principal objectives of IONS as enshrined in the Charter lay emphasis on collective maritime security and specifically include the following:²²

1. To strengthen the capability of all littoral nation-states of the Indian Ocean to address present and anticipated challenges to maritime security.
2. To establish a variety of multinational maritime cooperative mechanisms designed to mitigate maritime security concerns among members.

Exercise ‘Milan’

The ‘Milan’ series—as the name suggests—were initiated by India in Andaman Islands in 1995 as informal meeting ground for the navies of Bay of Bengal littorals. These interactive exercises have been providing an appropriate platform for the littoral navies to become familiarised with each others’ functional organisations, working ethos, operating procedures, cultural strengths, inherent sensitivities, and the like. A common understanding of these attributes fosters mutual trust, generates empathy amongst personnel and engenders confidence in each other’s actions in a collaborative environment. Beginning with a modest participation of only four navies in the first edition, the scope and scale of the exercise has progressively increased to the largest-ever participation by navies and maritime forces of 17 countries in February 2014. The expansion of this initiative from a sub-regional to a pan-Indian Ocean context is, in itself, a testimony to its unqualified success and future potential.

Sub-regional Constructs/Initiatives

In addition to the above-mentioned pan-IOR mechanisms, other sub-regional forums which are engaged in localised maritime security activities of varying intensity; and which either have predominant representation from IOR littoral states or are of greater relevance to this region, are mentioned next.

1. *Southern African Development Community (SADC)*: The SADC grouping comprises 14 countries of the South African landmass and is mainly steered by South Africa. The forum has an active ‘Standing Maritime Committee’, which envisions sub-regional peace through mutual maritime security and maintenance of maritime capacities to meet contingencies requiring quick response.²³ Naval cooperation tasks are distributed amongst various SADC constituents.

2. *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)*: The Council comprising six Persian Gulf states has elements of limited maritime cooperation under the 'Joint GCC Defence Pact' signed in December 2000. Limited cooperative maritime activities have centered on annual joint naval and air exercises, and standardisation of joint operations manuals.²⁴ The GCC states have been coordinating with multinational maritime forces deployed in and around the Gulf of Aden and Persian Gulf since 2009, to mitigate terror threats to their oil production and transportation infrastructure ashore. They are also providing logistics support to these maritime forces in varying degrees.
3. *ASEAN*: The 10 ASEAN nations have an active and well-functional maritime cooperative set-up, generally being handled by a sub-group called the 'ASEAN Defence Ministers Meet Plus' (ADMM+). Cooperative measures being discussed by an even more broad-based forum, namely, ARF, are also relevant in this regard. However, since such jointness covers parts of both, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and also involves majority of extra-regional countries, only ongoing and feasible maritime capacity leverages in the Indian Ocean context are discussed in the subsequent section of this article.
4. *Exercise 'Aman'*: Pakistan has been hosting 'Aman' series of multilateral maritime exercises biennially since 2007, though the 2015 version was inexplicably called off. While the exercises have been dominated by extra-regional naval participation, they have progressively created limited capacities for inter-operability amongst participating IOR littorals too.
5. *Galle Dialogue*: An initiative of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence and Navy, the first edition of Galle Dialogue was held in 2010 with 11 participating countries. Since then, this forum for discussing maritime security issues has become an annual event of some significance, with 2014 dialogue being attended by senior government functionaries and maritime professionals from 35 countries.

SYNERGISING MARITIME CAPACITIES: THE WAY FORWARD

Notwithstanding complex geopolitical realities and potential challenges emanating there from, a sincere attempt towards cooperative maritime security must be made in view of collective benefits that could accrue

from this process. A maritime security consultant has, in fact, termed the maritime capacity-building process as: ‘...both, a means and an end for sustainable human development.’²⁵ This profound insight, by implication, links the very continuity of human race to the imperative of synergising maritime capacities of nations to deal with the existing and evolving challenges, both, of immediate and long-standing nature. Thus, the key question that needs to be addressed is: *How might the Indian Ocean countries transition from maritime capacity building to effective maritime cooperation?* The modalities of the response to this question can be disaggregated into three distinct levels, based on the geographical coverage and scale of participation: localised bilateral/trilateral measures, sub-regional initiatives, and the regional endeavours. Suggestions on how to take it forward for each level are explained next.

Localised Bilateral/Trilateral Measures

India–Indonesia and India–Thailand coordinated patrols (CORPAT) along their respective maritime boundaries are an annual feature. The scope of these patrols can be increased to include larger areas in the ‘funnel’ leading up to Malacca Strait. Similarly, the area of MALSINDO joint surface patrols can also be expanded to cover the above ‘funnel’. This would perhaps also imply an expansion in the scope of MALSINDO by including Indian maritime capacities based in the Andamans to cater for consequential increase in force-level requirements.

Another significant development is the signing of a trilateral India–Sri Lanka–Maldives ‘Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement’ in July 2013, during the Second National Security Advisor (NSA)-level Meeting, with the objective of significantly raising level of their maritime cooperation.²⁶ Specific issues include enhancement of maritime domain awareness (MDA) through common access to International Maritime Organization (IMO)-mandated systems like ‘long range identification and tracking’ (LRIT) system for merchant ships and sharing of ‘automatic identification system’ (AIS) data; provision of training and capacity building in MDA, search and rescue (SAR) and oil pollution response; and the conduct of trilateral exercises to validate contingency action plans. The above agreement’s broad concepts of cooperation were reviewed for progressive implementation in third NSA-level meet in March 2014.²⁷ New areas of cooperation, including hydrography and visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) training, were also added. The

highlight of this meet was the participation of Seychelles and Mauritius as guests.

This synergistic initiative has huge potential for further collaborative endeavours. During his 'state visit' to these countries in March 2015 the Indian Prime Minister exhorted Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius to become 'vital partners' of India in collectively exploiting these possibilities. He assured them that multi-dimensional Indian capacities will work towards augmenting modest maritime force levels of Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius in the surveillance of their large maritime zones. The maritime agencies of these countries, in turn, would benefit from sharing of Indian expertise, experience and technological know-how in common operating environment. With Maldives already on board, the evolving pattern suggests that success of this nascent venture—and there is no reason to believe otherwise—could be a model for subsequent replication in the context of other IOR littorals, which are similarly constrained.

Sub-regional Initiatives

While it is hoped that the scope of participation in MSSSI will expand in future, some IOR littoral states are already contributing in related capacity-building programmes under the 'Malacca and Singapore Straits Safety Cooperative Mechanism' of 2007.²⁸ Six collaborative projects related to navigational safety, security and environmental protection of this area are being managed under this 'Cooperative Mechanism', of which India is providing fiscal and material support to Projects 1 and 4.²⁹ However, the task of managing this waterway efficiently is quite enormous. It should, therefore, become a collective responsibility of nations comprising the IOR littorals as well as extra-regional stakeholders.

As regards anti-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden, results of its broadened ambit incorporating the 'five-step anti-piracy action plan'³⁰ are more than visible. However, cooperative multi-pronged effort must persist for some more time in order to take the task to its logical conclusion. Therefore, IOR littoral states should continue to commit their maritime capacities to this mission.

The 'Milan' series of interactive initiative for Bay of Bengal littorals has expanded to include participation by navies of Australia and Mauritius. This foundational mechanism, which has been fostering an enabling environment for inter-operability for so long, is just about poised to move into actual collaborative domain in the next phase. It should

accordingly be leveraged towards the creation of substantive maritime synergistic capacities of pan-regional relevance.

Regional Endeavours

Anuradha Chenoy argues that ‘...in a region as vast as IOR, bilateral agreements, though important, have to be backed by multilateralism. Thus IORA needs to be revitalised.’³¹ Chenoy’s comments could not have come at a more appropriate moment as IORA acknowledged, for the first time in October 2014, that maritime piracy and terrorism threaten its vision of building a more stable, secure and prosperous IOR. The Association has accordingly ‘...committed to work with the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and other relevant organisations to address...’ these challenges.³² It is thus argued that the appropriate moment for both these organisations to align, at least, their maritime security cooperative vision—if not other aspects—has perhaps arrived. This prospective alignment could benefit both the organisations in that while IORA would get revitalised by gaining access to a wider membership base of IONS and its constituents’ maritime security agencies, IONS navies would receive much-needed national backing and patronage inherent in the IORA Charter.³³

While consensus-building on creating commonality of certain objectives between IORA and IONS may take some time, the much-awaited endorsement of the IONS ‘Charter of Business’ has paved the way for this forum to graduate to the next stage of planning and implementing collaborative maritime activities. In this context, recent activities of the ADMM+ mechanism do provide valuable points of reference, to start with. Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, Chief of the Australian Navy and Chairman of fourth IONS meet (2014), in fact, emphasised the relevance of ADMM+’s model to IONS’ future scheme of things. One of the two aims of 2014 Conclave, as articulated by Griggs, is given below.

To accelerate maturation process of IONS by using as much as we can from institutions like the WPNS and ADMM+ expert working groups (EWG). One way to accelerate that maturation is that we consider introduction of IONS working groups. This is something we have been able to see in operation in the context of ADMM+, where in just a couple of years, [these] working groups have conducted a series of table-top and even field exercises which are of mutual benefit.³⁴

In this context, it would be worthwhile to mention two successful cooperative activities of ADMM+ mechanism in 2013. It conducted first-ever joint HADR and military medicine (MM) exercise in June 2013 at Brunei, wherein seven ships, 20 helicopters and more than 2,000 troops from ASEAN countries and eight dialogue partners participated. Another set of multilateral maritime security exercises was conducted at Jervis Bay off Australia's East Coast in end September 2013, which saw the participation of ships from 11 countries. Positive takeaways by the Indian and Australian navies, which participated in both these exercises, could provide much-needed 'insiders perspective' when IONS starts planning and conducting events of its own.

If and when the efforts of IORA and IONS do fructify into substantial collaboration, IOR littoral states can aim towards next higher stage of forming an 'Asian Maritime Partnership' (AMP),³⁵ based broadly on the '1000 Ship Navy' concept which was proposed by two US Navy Admirals in 2005. Functional scope of the voluntary multinational maritime force under AMP would be confined to the Indian Ocean regional domain. The scale of participation would accordingly be much smaller. This centralised force could collectively police the regional maritime commons and be readily available to protect against a wide spectrum of existing and evolving threats.

Yet another idea floated by Admiral Arun Prakash, former Chief of the Indian Navy, during the inaugural IONS Conclave in 2008, and which merits consideration, is the formation of a 'Forum for Indian Ocean Maritime Initiatives' in the track 2 domain.³⁶ This body, which would not be constrained by limitations inherent in formal constructs like the IORA and IONS—and by implication, engender unrestrained thought-processes—could complement these initiatives by providing vital inputs, intellectual capital and conceptual support.

REALITY CHECK: POSSIBLE HINDRANCES TO EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

A review of various cooperative mechanisms in the IOR tends to present quite a reassuring picture. The suggested ways forward towards synergisation of naval capacities under the umbrella of one or more of these mechanisms also appear, *prima facie*, to be practicable. However, a deeper look within brings out certain factors which are either acting as effective roadblocks in current scenario, or have the potential to inhibit effective cooperative dynamics in future. These factors can further be

grouped into two categories: intra-regional fault lines and extra-regional pressure points.

Intra-regional Fault Lines

Asian littorals along the Indian Ocean rim are particularly fractured into sub-groups like West Asia, South Asia and South-East Asia. Peculiar characteristics, issues and nature of internal dynamics of these sub-groups, which are at great variance with each other, tend to dilute any holistic attempt at formulation of a unified maritime agenda. Furthermore, some states within the above-mentioned sub-groups, for example, India and its immediate western neighbour, which are consigned to a tenuous long-term relationship, render most of the cooperative concepts as non-starters.³⁷ Strained Arab–Israel relations on one hand, and the Iran–Saudi Arabia equation on the other, also follow a similar ‘exclusive’ pattern. In such a situation, it is indeed an uphill task to get all IOR littoral states on a common platform with regard to concepts and methodologies towards desired maritime cooperative outcomes.

Extra-regional Pressure Points

These mainly relate to near-permanent presence of the US Navy in IOR, and the aspirations of the Chinese Navy to first register its presence in the region, and then follow it up by projecting power as part of its ‘Far Seas’ operating philosophy. India does figure in the American scheme of things for this part of the world, as a maritime ‘partner’, with an implied mandate to become a ‘net security provider’ in IOR under its ‘Neo-Nixon’ doctrine.³⁸ But greater cooperative possibilities, particularly in the Arabian Sea and its adjoining seascape, inherently get limited due to a unique division of responsibilities between two of its unified combatant commands, namely, the Pacific (PACOM) and the Central (CENTCOM) Commands, wherein cooperative activities between US–Pakistan and US–India are kept well separated.³⁹ As a consequence, even if there was a hypothetical chance of India and Pakistan cooperating on maritime security issues, this American arrangement makes it that much more difficult.

The Chinese naval presence in IOR and its consequent interaction with various littorals will definitely affect regional maritime cooperative endeavours. China has, of late, started asserting that as a major power with commensurate obligations, it is committed to participate in international cooperative activities so as to ‘maintain global peace and

stability'. However, moot point is what rules Beijing would play by, as the global community has repeatedly observed the Chinese propensity to increasingly question the established global order. There is, thus, bound to be significant shift in the policy direction of evolving regional mechanisms like IONS when China strongly stakes its claim to membership of such fora in the future.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The vastness of the Indian Ocean provides ample space and opportunities for multi-spectrum challenges to evolve, sustain and also adversely impact the interests and well-being of littoral states. Large distances place national maritime agencies in a disadvantageous position insofar as quick arrival at the scene and mounting of suitable response towards effective mitigation of the crisis is concerned. Entry into or exit through this ocean is also constrained by specific choke points at its periphery. This geographical reality itself can be leveraged by unscrupulous and/or disruptive elements to bring major portion of global commerce and energy lifelines transiting through IOR to a virtual standstill.

Great diversity exists in virtually every conceivable facet amongst IOR littoral states—be it in political orientation, systems of governance, degree of affluence, or state of political, social and economic stability. The consequent differences in their overall worldview precludes any viable notion of collaboration to address common regional challenges. The regularity at which natural disasters strike random corners of the littoral adds an altogether new challenge, which affects every nation adversely and over which there is no control except to plan for post-calamity response. Further, continued presence of extra-regional countries' maritime forces, and ambition of others to establish permanent presence—ostensibly in support of their maritime interests—also impacts regional maritime security environment.

All these dimensions impart uniqueness to this region. The maritime capacities of most littoral states—barring very few—are not strong enough to deal individually with a complex set of challenges emanating from the above conditions. There is thus a strong case for forming aggregated and synergised response strategies which would have the potential to alter maritime security situation dramatically. But such collaborative initiatives would have to operate in a domain where various players positioned at the end of ideological, religious, economic or political divides could largely ensure that mutual agreements are hard

to come by. Also, while extra-regional maritime powers will be looking at furthering their own interests while deploying naval forces in IOR, what should concern the IOR resident community is the propensity of some deviant nations in the region to drive their own agenda—rightly or wrongly—claiming their tacit support. This, in turn, could cause avoidable deviation from the common cooperative agenda for managing regional maritime challenges. Similarly, methodologies will also have to be established for working around the intra-regional fault lines, possibly by countries having good relations with all such parties—who otherwise share mutually acrimonious relationship—taking the lead.

It is thus posited that while consensus building in such a situation could indeed be quite cumbersome, it must nevertheless be explored, as potential benefits far outweigh the effort involved in overcoming the pitfalls. Existing maritime cooperative initiatives in the IOR have shown great promise and potential. The need of the hour is to maintain the right momentum in leveraging collective capacities for effective maritime security, and accelerate the whole process under one or two mutually acceptable pan-regional forums.

NOTES

1. A.K. Antony, former Defence Minister of India, stated so during his address at the inaugural Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Conference at New Delhi on 15 February 2008. See Ravi Vohra, P.K. Ghosh and Devbrat Chakraborty (eds), *Contemporary Trans-national Challenges: International Maritime Connectivities*, New Delhi: Knowledge World Publishers, 2008, p. 205.
2. These countries have built navies of sizeable strength by acquisitions and/or by indigenous shipbuilding. Their capabilities are also distinctly more robust on account of possession of large ships of destroyer/frigate types as against corvettes and patrol ships held by rest of the countries. This is clearly discernible from Table 1.
3. *Jane's Fighting Ships 2013–14*, Surrey, UK: IHS Global, 2013.
4. Seychelles has a land area of 460 sq km and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 1,336,559 sq km, while the corresponding figures for Maldives are 300 sq km and 923,322 sq km, respectively. See Kamlesh K. Agnihotri, *Strategic Direction of the Chinese Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publications, 2015, p. 134.
5. Rupert Herbert-Burns, 'Naval Power in the Indian Ocean: Evolving Roles, Missions and Capabilities', in David Michel and Russel Sticklor (eds),

- Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges*, Washington, DC: Stimson Centre, 2012, p. 50.
6. Integrated Headquarters of Indian Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009*, Sivakasi: Standard Press (India) Pvt. Ltd, August 2009, chapter 7, pp. 120–22.
 7. V. Narayan, 'Al-Qaida Forced Navy to Change Yemen Operation Plan', *The Times of India*, 21 April 2015, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Al-Qaida-forced-Navy-to-change-Yemen-operation-plan/articleshow/46982469.cms>, accessed on 23 November 2015.
 8. RAN, *Australian Maritime Doctrine: RAN Doctrine 1*, Canberra: Sea Power Centre, 2010, p. 173.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
 10. Peter J. Dean, 'Australia: Maritime Strategy and Regional Maritime Diplomacy', in Justin Jones (ed.), *A Maritime School of Strategic Thought for Australia: Perspectives*, Canberra: Sea Power Centre, 2013, p. 94.
 11. See 'Military Spending in South-East Asia: Shopping Spree', *The Economist*, 24 March 2012, available at <http://www.economist.com/node/21551056>, accessed on 23 October 2015.
 12. The details of naval force modernisation of these countries have been taken from a Japanese defence white paper. See 'South East Asia', in *Defense of Japan 2012*, chapter 1, section 5, pp. 64–65, available at http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2012/09_Part1_Chapter1_Sec5.pdf, accessed on 23 October 2015.
 13. Herbert-Burns, 'Naval Power in the Indian Ocean', n. 5, p. 45.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. Though the global Piracy Data Centre suggests an increase in the incidents of piracy in South-East Asian waters during 2013–14, detailed perusal of the data shows that these relate to incidents like oil siphoning with the complicity of ship's crew and petty robberies, unlike seizing of ships for ransom. See International Maritime Bureau (IMB), 'Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships—2014 Annual Report', January 2015, available at <http://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2014-Annual-IMB-Piracy-Report-ABRIDGED.pdf>, accessed on 19 November 2015.
 16. *Ibid.*, Table 1, p. 5.
 17. '14th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Indian Ocean Rim Association: Perth Communiqué', 9 October 2014, available at <http://www.iora.net/documents/communiqu.aspx>, accessed on 25 October 2015.
 18. IONS, 'Charter of Business', Version 1.1, 28 March 2014, available at http://www.ions.in/sites/default/files/IONS_Charter_Version_28_March_2014_0.pdf, accessed on 25 October 2015.

19. These also included the heads of primary uniformed maritime security agencies where no formal navy exists.
20. Address by Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Chief of the Naval Staff, during the inauguration of the IONS Conference, in Vohra et al., *Contemporary Trans-national Challenges*, n. 1, p. 219.
21. The IONS has 22 navies (or primary uniformed maritime security agencies where no formal navy exists) as members, including those of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and four as observers, while IORA has only 20 members. Importantly, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are not represented in IORA.
22. For details, see Australian IONS website, <http://www.navy.gov.au/ions/charter>, accessed on 25 October 2015.
23. Bernard H. Teuteberg, 'Operationalising Regional Maritime Cooperation towards Ensuring Collective Maritime Security for the Indian Ocean Rim', in Vohra et al., *Contemporary Trans-national Challenges*, n. 1, pp. 160–65.
24. Ibid.
25. Mustafa Alani, 'Maritime Capacity Enhancement: The Case of Gulf States and Beyond', in Vohra et al., *Contemporary Trans-national Challenges*, n. 1, p. 144.
26. The agreement was signed at Colombo on 9 July 2013. See 'Sri Lanka Signs Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement with India and Maldives', 9 July 2013, available at http://www.srilankaembassy.be/old/Home_Page_Photo/2013/Doc36.pdf, accessed on 28 October 2015.
27. Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Third NSA Level Trilateral Meeting of India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka Held on March 6, 2014', available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/infocus-article.htm?23037>, accessed on 28 October 2015.
28. IMO, 'Milestone Agreement Reached on Co-operation over the Straits of Malacca and Singapore', Briefing No. 29/2007, 18 September 2007, available at http://www.imo.org/Newsroom/mainframe.asp?topic_id=1472&doc_id=8471, accessed on 28 October 2015.
29. Projects 1 and 4 relate to the removal of wrecks/submerged vessels; and the tide, tidal current and wind observation systems, respectively. For details, see the presentation of Malacca and Singapore Cooperative Mechanism's Project Coordination Committee on 24 November 2008, available at http://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/eng/current/malacca_sympo/8_1.ppt, accessed on 28 October 2015.
30. These steps include: tracking the trail of ransom money; prosecution of ransom money beneficiaries for abetting piracy; conduct of naval operations under the United Nations (UN); sanitisation of the Somali coastline

- through identified corridors; and enactment of national laws to criminalise piracy. See *Hindustan Times*, 'India Suggests Five Step Anti-piracy Action Plan', 26 January 2011, available at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-suggests-five-step-anti-piracy-action-plan/Article1-654905.aspx>, accessed on 28 October 2015.
31. Anuradha M. Chenoy, 'Revitalise Ocean Rim Union', *The New Indian Express*, 30 October 2014, p. 8.
 32. '14th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of IORA: Perth Communiqué', n. 17.
 33. The Charter of the erstwhile IOR-ARC of March 1997, which is also applicable in the context of IORA, has been adopted by 'governments' of member states; while the IONS 'Charter of Business' has been endorsed by Chiefs of the navies or designated principal agencies responsible for maritime security (where no formal navy exists). Also see n. 21.
 34. 'Remarks by Incoming Chair, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, Chief of the Navy, Australia, at 4th IONS Conclave, Perth, March 26, 2014', available at <http://www.ions.gov.in/content/indian-ocean-naval-symposium-2014>, accessed on 28 March 2015. WPNS stands for Western Pacific Naval Symposium.
 35. Kamlesh K. Agnihotri, 'Protection of Trade and Energy Supplies in the Indian Ocean Region' in Sreemati Ganguli (ed.) *Strategising Energy: An Asian Perspective*, New Delhi, Knowledge World Publishers, 2014, p. 272.
 36. Arun Prakash, 'Commonality of Maritime Challenges and Options for a Cooperative IOR Maritime Security Structure', in Vohra et al., *Contemporary Trans-national Challenges*, n. 1, pp. 188–89.
 37. For instance, Pakistan has not joined the IONS initiative despite repeated invites, while India does not get invited for the 'Aman' series of multinational joint exercises hosted by Pakistan.
 38. 'Neo-Nixon' doctrine refers to the devolution of primary responsibility for regional security to major democratic powers whom the US would support in capacity building and advise in fulfillment of assigned tasks. See Walter C. Ladwig III, 'A Neo-Nixon Doctrine for the Indian Ocean: Helping States Help Themselves', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 36, No. 3, May–June 2012, p. 384.
 39. US PACOM deals with India-specific activities, while those related with Pakistan are handled by CENTCOM.
 40. Agnihotri, *Strategic Direction of the Chinese Navy*, n. 4, pp. 152–53.