

Scholars' Round Table Conference Report

Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats in the Indian Ocean: An Overview

Speaker: Ms Aditi Chatterjee, Research Associate

Chair: Prof Rajesh Rajagopalan, JNU

Discussants: Brig. Rahul K Bhonsle
Atul Bharadwaj

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The paper, which is the first part of the scholar's monograph for NMF, identified the non-traditional security threats prevailing in the Indian Ocean, and examined their causes and trends, as an essential first step to formulate measures to respond to these security challenges.

The major non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean so identified ranged from piracy and terrorism to various transnational crimes like illicit trafficking of drugs, human and weapons. These also included climate change and natural disasters, irregular migration and food shortage. The various NTS threats are often interlinked.

The scholar identified piracy and maritime terrorism as the most critical non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean. She pointed out that the permissive environment, which exists within states and their territorial waters either due to corrupt political practices or under-funded law enforcement, supports the criminal infrastructure for piracy to flourish. Most of the vulnerabilities that have encouraged a higher rate of pirate attacks also apply to terrorism, including inadequate coastal surveillance, lax port security, a profusion of targets, the overwhelming dependence of maritime trade on passage through congested chokepoints. These gaps and weaknesses provide the terrorists with an opportunity to move, hide, and strike. The multinational crew of ships also contributes in the increasing threat at sea as it is virtually impossible to verify authenticity of enlisted crew. She opined that though maritime terrorism is conducted by terrorists to fund their onshore operations, their primary motivation has always been political in nature and they aim to influence governments through threat of violence at sea.

The speaker pointed out that there may exist a nexus between terrorist and pirates as they have shared interests when it comes to conducting sea-based attacks. These interests are primarily derived from their respective causative factors. Neither terrorists nor pirates are completely self-sufficient, and both require some form of support in order to achieve their objectives. However, there are certain pitfalls that

accompany this collusion. Both, terrorism and piracy are high-risk activities, and any relationship forged between their perpetrators will exponentially increase the magnitude of the combined threat.

Other non-traditional security threats identified by the scholar included organised crimes at sea such as human trafficking, arms and drugs smuggling, which are increasingly linked to global patterns of violence. The prevalence of conflicts and insurgencies provides the arms smugglers with a ready market in areas such as the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Stimulated by political instability, poverty and a lack of order in many developing countries, international migration has become a significant concern and has been increasingly linked to organised criminal groups that now largely control the smuggling and trafficking of people.

The speaker pointed out that the major reason behind this sudden surge of human trafficking is the fact that people-traffickers and smugglers make high profits while risking relatively short prison sentences in comparison to drug dealers. Despite some attempts to promote inter-state cooperation against human smuggling and trafficking, the issue has continued to cause political problems among the Southeast Asian states, especially since the financial crisis of 1997. The lack of political unity is another reason for the rise in human trafficking among Southeast Asian countries. The illegal trade in women has also become a major source of income for people-traffickers, and remains difficult to apprehend as it is predominantly hidden within the broader phenomenon of undocumented migration.

According to the assessment of the scholar, the most common types of weapons that are trafficked across the IOR fall into the Small Arms and Light Weapons category. The primary causes for the arms trafficking as underlined by the speaker are the state failure in Somalia and the ready availability of small arms have served as enablers for the growth in piracy in the Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden over the last decade. Conflict in Afghanistan has functioned as a major demand and supply factor in the illegal trade in arms within the IOR, which has been conducted along maritime as well as overland routes. The internal conflict in southern Thailand and instability within Myanmar continue to bear the potential to draw in illegal arms. Also the high volume of inter-regional seaborne commerce traversing the IOR and the variable quality of port state controls further complicate the detection of illicit arms shipments. The linkages that are of greatest concern are flows of small arms and light weapons (SALW) from Iran to Yemen and onwards to the Eastern Mediterranean via the Suez Canal, and between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa.

Drug trafficking is another important adjunct to maritime terrorism. Several countries in the Indian Ocean are major producers of narcotics and serve as transit routes for illicit drugs exported to North America, Europe and other parts of Asia. Opium (poppy) is cultivated in two main areas referred to as the 'Golden Triangle' and the 'Golden Crescent'. The Golden Triangle, which incorporates Northern Thailand,

Eastern Myanmar and Western Laos, is one of the leading producing regions of narcotics in the world. Drug trafficking, and the laundering of drug money accounts for what is by far the most important category of illicit trade flows in the Indian Ocean.

Another salient threat in the Indian Ocean is the illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, especially in the important tuna-rich waters of countries like Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius and Comoros in the western Indian Ocean. Depletion of several key fish species and global fish stocks with broader consequences for food supply, the problem of overfishing in the IOR is closely tied to the loss of economic benefits and livelihood sources for the inhabitants of island states in the region.

Climate change has lately become one of the most pressing security concerns in the IOR. Several studies reveal that climate change is likely to aggravate interstate and intrastate competition in the region over natural resources, and especially over the availability of water. The unchecked soaring carbon emissions are likely to magnify the risk of conflict, hunger, floods, drought and water-related food shortages. It extends a stark warning to the world as to how with every rise in degree the impact of climate change would not only be severe but also irreversible. Since around 40 percent of Asia's four billion inhabitants live within 100 km of the coastline, the effect of climate change is likely to hit this region the hardest. Spill-over effects from the massive scale of such displacements will manifest themselves in the form of socio-political instabilities triggered by resource competition, ethnic tensions, and infrastructural pressures caused by increased migration and climate refugee flows.

To conclude, the speaker pointed out that in Indian Ocean region cooperation occurs mostly in the spheres of economy and trade, rather than in security, and is, to a large extent, hampered by distrust and lack of interaction. The task of ensuring the security of waterways, especially of strategic chokepoints in the IOR is beyond the capacity of one littoral state, and the lack of regional cooperative framework for the suppression of maritime violence, including piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing and trafficking of drugs and arms. However, much can be gained from cooperative regional approach between states that promotes consultation not confrontation, reassurance not deterrence, transparency not confidentiality, prevention not correction, and interdependence not unilateralism. In such circumstances navies can contribute much towards enhancing maritime security, managing disasters, providing humanitarian assistance and limiting environmental security challenges. The IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) and the KOMODO exercise are consultative and cooperative efforts, which can be used to seek convergence against the growing asymmetric threats.

The paper was applauded by the seminar participants as being comprehensive and the presentation as being lucid. **Brigadier Bhonsle**, one of the discussants, pointed out that the flow of the paper is consistent, but paper needed more focus. There should be greater emphasis on environmental issues and energy security. He also pointed out that the NTS can be better analysed with the help of theories like

Whitner's or the Sub-conventional Paradigm. It is very important to define the NTS threats and state-sponsored challenges. He pointed out that the issue of maritime terrorism was well researched; there can be a detailed study on the maritime routes followed by the terrorists and states' sponsored threats and how to tackle the nexus between the various threats.

The second discussant **Atul Bharadwaj** pointed out that the paper required an analysis through the political science approach. He further pointed out that the moving of war zones (based on piracy threats) closer to the Indian coast and the arrival of PMSCs and floating armouries have caused concerns in India. History and political science had to be consulted for a better understanding and analyses of strategic and security issues.

Dr. Manoharan, the internal discussant, commented that that the paper was good but had scope of improvement. There is a need to study the trends in the concluding section. He pointed out that the paper had not looked into all kinds of maritime terrorism, and there was a need to incorporate primary sources. He also pointed out that confusions arise from the interchangeable use of Indian Ocean and Indian Ocean Region, which could be avoided.

Director NMF, Vice Admiral (Retd) Pradeep Kaushiva, remarked that terrorism stems from not only political reasons but also has ideological and religious connotations. He commented that IOR represents a heterogeneous region, terrorism and other the non-traditional threats emanate from, and draw strength from the lack of congeniality among its littorals and their diverse racial and governmental structures. The importance of good order at sea cannot be over-emphasized. All acts of terrorism begin and manifest on land, like in the case of 26/11 Mumbai terror strike via Kuber; the terror mission was state-sponsored (or at least state-supported/ state-tolerated), but the sea became the medium. He further pointed out that there is a need to stymie the flow of funding in order to control piracy.

The chairperson **Prof Rajesh Rajagopalan** concluded the Conference by saying that there is no clear definition of NTS available in literature, making it difficult to demarcate the boundary between traditional and non-traditional threats. Also, while there has been a decline in the traditional security threats, the non-traditional threats are on the rise, along with an increase in the number of actors in Indian Ocean. Thus, coordination among these actors to respond to the non-traditional threats has become complex affair. With the shifting regional balance of power, it is necessary to draw insights from social and political science to find lasting solutions.
