

Sri Lanka's Proposal for an 'Indian Ocean Order': An Assessment

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Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, while delivering the inaugural address at the Indian Ocean Conference on 1st September 2016¹, called on the Indian Ocean countries to take the lead in determining 'their own future'. He stressed on the need to craft an 'Indian Ocean Order' with accepted rules and arrangements that would guide interactions among states with the primary responsibility of upholding freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. Referring to IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), he opined that the regional organisation had fallen short of expectations. In the above context, this issue brief discusses the Sri Lankan proposal for an Indian Ocean Order. It also examines the extent to which this would be different from IORA.

Indian Ocean Order

The Indian Ocean is becoming one of the world's busiest and most critical trade corridors, with the regional developments impacting on security and stability of not only the littoral countries but also other like China, Japan, South Korea, the Uand the world at large. Countries within the region and beyond will therefore attempt to influence the power equations in the region to serve respective interests. As a result, the Indian Ocean will be a major theatre of competition. This should be seen in context of the bigger picture of a historical shift of power from the West towards Asia.

However, those who are geographically located in the region, have a primary interest in the security of the region, for their future is directly linked to the manner in which competition is managed and cooperation is strengthened. Thus, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister says, "We must commit ourselves to an order based on the right of all States to freedom of navigation –the unimpeded lawful maritime commerce and over-flight. Our own futures and the futures of extra regional partners are, therefore, heavily invested in how strategic security is managed in the region. Many countries remain dependent on energy supplies and traded goods that are carried across the region."

It is in this context that Sri Lanka had proposed that the Indian Ocean countries should take the lead in determining their own future and craft an Indian Ocean Order. In this Order, no single state should dominate the system and it should be built on consensual agreement. This Ocean Order will have the primary responsibility of upholding freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. It will ensure that shipping and air routes to East Asia and beyond are kept open, and thereby help in closer economic cooperation among countries in the region.

The proposal also calls for an Indian Ocean Development Fund for development of the region, and also for establishing a strong Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Management mechanism to deal with natural and manmade disasters. The process for establishing an Indian Ocean Order could begin with a dialogue between SAARC and ASEAN and all the interested major and middle powers. Thus, the Order would be a result of a consensual agreement for a maritime security cooperation for mutual benefit.

Very significantly, the proposal also suggests the establishment of an Indian Ocean Assembly which will not only bring together Heads of State and Governments but also eminent individuals in all fields to recommend measures for consideration. Further, a programme for cooperation in Education and Human Capital Development is also suggested.

The countries of the Indian Ocean region are diverse in terms of size, resources, and interests. They also differ in their views towards extra regional states. Further, historical disputes and growing militarisation result in strategic mistrust. Despite this, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe calls for the need to build a political eco-

system that contains the local disputes and prevents them from disrupting or spilling over to a common Indian Ocean agenda.

An analysis of the proposal indicates that Sri Lanka takes a realistic assessment of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and calls on the littoral countries to take the initiative in devising a cooperative architecture. Implied in its proposal, though unsaid, is also the warning that an inability to do so would leave them pliable to initiatives of extra-regional countries, with their security concerns overlooked. Its proposal for an Indian Ocean Order is forward-looking and inclusive, wherein no one country would dominate. The task upholding freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean is possible only when members of Indian Ocean trust each other. Building this strategic trust is possible only when the apex political leaders meet and provide the necessary directions. Here arises the relevance of its proposal for an Indian Ocean Assembly. It does not overlook the challenges inherent in implementing the proposal, but strongly calls for the littoral countries to understand the need to cooperate so that they can determine the manner in which they would like the maritime space to be effectively managed. The proposal is all comprehensive in that the Indian Ocean Order would also incorporate an Indian Ocean Development fund; a strong Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Management mechanism; an Indian Ocean Assembly facilitating political engagement at the highest level; and also a programme for cooperation in Education and Human Capital Development.

IORA – Indian Ocean Rim Association

Sri Lanka's 'discomfort' with the IORA is that it is dormant with regard to strategic issues concerning the Indian Ocean; and its present scope of meeting at official and ministerial level is insufficient for the purpose of establishing an Indian Ocean Order. While the wording of IORA Charter aptly reflects this assessment, if one observes the manner in which IORA's agenda has evolved, especially since 2011, this view may need to be reviewed.

The Charter of IORA clearly spells out that the Association will facilitate and promote economic co-operation, bringing together *inter alia* representatives of

member states' governments, businesses and academia. Its objective is to focus on those areas of economic co-operation which provide maximum opportunities to develop shared interests and reap mutual benefits. Towards this end, IORA seeks to formulate and implement projects for economic co-operation relating to trade facilitation and liberalization, promotion of foreign investment, scientific and technological exchanges, tourism, movement of natural persons and service providers on a non-discriminatory basis; and the development of infrastructure and human resources *inter alia* poverty alleviation, promotion of maritime transport and related matters, cooperation in the fields of fisheries trade, research and management, aquaculture, education and training, energy, Information Technology, health, protection of the environment, agriculture, disaster management.

However, the Council of Ministers meeting held in November 2011 in Bengaluru, India, chose to focus on six specific areas, and thereby broadened IORA's agenda. The IORA Charter spells out that this meeting gave a focused direction towards formulation of a dynamic road map of cooperation, in consonance with the growing global emphasis on the geostrategic primacy of the Indian Ocean rim. The priority areas are: (i) Maritime Safety and Security; (ii) Trade and Investment Facilitation; (iii) Fisheries Management; (iv) Disaster Risk Management; (v) Academic, Science & Technology Cooperation; and (vi) Tourism and Cultural Exchanges. Thus, it can be concluded that IORA has evolved from economic cooperation to other areas which directly or indirectly relate to strategic issues.

As regards the IORA meetings, these are conducted at the level of Ministers and Officials. It has a secretariat functioning in Mauritius and has many working groups dealing with various issues. ² Though the IORA was conceived essentially to focus on economic cooperation, a closer look at the regional organisations priority areas as spelt out in 2011 brings out that it has covered all areas raised in the Sri Lankan proposal – be it economic development; disaster management, or maritime safety and security. However, it needs to be acknowledged that when these issues are discussed and debated at the level of Ministers and officials – rather than at the summit level – its implementation is not very effective.

Interestingly, like Sri Lanka, India recognises the growing importance of maritime trade in an increasingly globalised world and supports freedom of navigation and over-flight and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law as reflected notably in the UNCLOS. India has urged all countries to show utmost respect for UNCLOS, which establishes the international legal order of the seas and oceans. India further believes that States should resolve disputes through peaceful means without threat or use of force.

Unlike Sri Lanka, however, India is of the view that if the Indian Ocean is to occupy a more prominent place in global political discourse, its best hope is the further development of the IORA which is soon going to complete 20 years. With 21 members, 7 dialogue partners and two observers, India strongly feels that IORA is the most obvious platform for trade, socio-economic and cultural cooperation. That IORA encourages interaction of business, academic institutions, think tanks, scholars and peoples of the member states to discuss issues of renewable energy, and blue economy to maritime safety and security, water science etc. However, like Sri Lanka, India too believes that the regional countries of IOR should shoulder primary responsibility.

It needs to be noted that while supporting IORA, India is simultaneously developing ties with the countries of the Indian Ocean Region. Its vision for the Indian Ocean was clearly spelt out by Prime Minister Modi in Mauritius in March 2015. It says that India, while safeguarding its mainland and islands and defending its interests, will ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean and make available its capacities to others; it will deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and strengthen their capacities. It also envisages collective action and cooperation to advance peace and security and respond to emergencies. Furthermore, India seeks a more integrated and cooperative future for the region that enhances sustainable development.³ This Indian Ocean vision has two sub-texts; one of cooperation and second of India playing an eminent role in such cooperative efforts.

Thus, like Sri Lanka, India too believes in consensus, cooperation and the littoral countries taking greater initiatives. While India believes that IORA is the best platform for trade, socio-economic and cultural cooperation; a closer look brings out

that issues of maritime safety and security, which is one of the six priority areas go much beyond trade and culture. Thus, there are two agendas in IORA, one explicit which the charter spells out and one implicit which deals with matters security and strategy. Interestingly, in the Indian Ocean Dialogue (IOD) process which is supported by the IORA Secretariat and where in IORA officials and representatives of think-tanks and civil society participate, matters of security, strategy and defence cooperation are discussed. The first IOD was held in Kochi, India in September 2014 and the second one in September 2015 in Perth, Australia. The Perth Consensus throws ample light that issues of security were discussed in this semi-official format. The six key themes discussed were cooperation in combating maritime transnational crime; maritime security and regional defence cooperation; regional cooperation in search and rescue; blue economy as a driver of economic growth; countering illegal fishing; and cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. ⁴

Thus, in IORA, strategic issues are being discussed indirectly. That these discussions in the regional association are not sufficient is reflected in India's step to come up with its own vision for the Indian Ocean. Summit level meetings, had they taken place, could have addressed these gaps to a large extent.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is an important strategically located Indian Ocean littoral country. This essay argues that its proposal for an Indian Ocean Order; and an Indian Ocean Assembly wherein the regions political leadership at the highest level would meet is an important contribution to the debate and discussion regarding the security architecture for the Indian Ocean Region. While India seeks to focus on IORA, the goals of Sri Lanka are no different from that of India. Sceptics might argue that Sri Lanka's assertion that no one country should unilaterally shape the strategic order of the region is directed at India which wants to play a major role commensurate with its global political standing, its politico-economic-strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region and its defence capability, specifically naval capability. However, this essay argues that there are more convergences than divergences in the viewpoints of the two countries. Ensuring maritime security, stability and economic development

of the region necessitates an inclusive process of cooperation and consensus; and the need for the Indian Ocean littorals to decide their own destiny.

This essay proposes that IORA should institutionalise summit-level meetings to impart a sense of purpose, direction and ownership. Then, IORA would come closer to Sri Lanka's proposal for an Indian Ocean Assembly. Second, strategic issues should be discussed in IORA during the summit meetings, leading to an understanding as spelt out in the Indian Ocean Order. To begin with, such issues can be discussed at an informal level until adequate confidence is developed in the process, as well as among the IORA members. In this manner, the benefits of an existing organisation would be preserved; and new ideas like that of an Indian Ocean Order and an Indian Ocean Assembly would also be incorporated in IORA. The emerging cooperative architecture would then become more relevant and responsive to meet the challenges of the Indian Ocean Region.

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Notes and References

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² Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Charter, <http://www.iora.net/charter.aspx> (last accessed 26 September 2016)

³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Remarks by Foreign Secretary at Indian Ocean Conference, 01 September 2016, http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27356/Remarks_by_Foreign_Secretary_at_Indian_Ocean_Conference_September_01_2016 (last accessed 11 September 2016)

⁴ Indian Ocean Dialogue 2015, The Perth Consensus, http://www.iora.net/media/159718/perth_consensus_iod_2015.pdf (last accessed 26 September 2016)