

**PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION IN
THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: A CASE STUDY OF THE INDIAN OCEAN
NAVAL SYMPOSIUM (IONS) – PART I**

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This is the first in a series of papers that provide an overview of the maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region and critique the progress of cooperation among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. Specifically, the series examines the role of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in bolstering maritime security in the IOR and also endeavours to make specific recommendations on strengthening the IONS construct in order to achieve its aims.

In this Part, the maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region are discussed in the context of the premise that cooperation on maritime security issues has traditionally been elusive due to a variety of reasons.

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Overview

“States that adjoin this ocean are differentiated by their varying political ideologies, by the God they pray to, by the language they converse in, by their history and their race.”¹

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has variously been labelled as “a region that does not inspire confidence in the potential for peaceful governance”², “a disaggregated region notable for its lack of homogeneity”³, and “a troubled and unstable region, apparently without any real unity, common identity or collective goal”⁴. In fact, a cursory scrutiny of contemporary literature on maritime security in the Indian Ocean tends to reinforce the perception of the IOR as a region riddled with State-on-State friction, internal chaos within States, and, vulnerability of large sections of its population to a host of non-traditional threats including natural disasters, food and water shortages, poverty, epidemic, piracy, terrorism and transnational organised crime. This assessment, unfortunately, is true to a

¹ Vice Admiral Jonathan Mead, “Naval Cooperation in a Sea of Anarchy”, in *Protecting the Ability to Trade in the Indian Ocean Maritime Economy*, Sea Power Series 3, ed Andrew Forbes, (Canberra: Sea Power Centre, Australia, 2014), 115.

² James Stavridis, “Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World’s Oceans”, (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 120.

³ Lee Cordner, “Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region”, *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs*, Vol 2(1) (2010), 16.

⁴ Colomban Lebas, “New Stakes in the Indian Ocean and French Policy”, *Ionsphere* (July 2013), 68.

large extent. In 2011, for example, a total of 142 political conflicts were recorded in the IOR, representing more than a third of the 388 conflicts worldwide, including 12 of the world's 20 wars, as well as an additional eight limited wars.⁵ The displacement of the Rohingyas from the Rakhine province of Myanmar in 2017, and the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia in September 2018, illustrate the gravity of non-traditional security challenges in the region.

Yet, the Indian Ocean has gained prominence as a focus of strategic policy for nations,⁶ its centrality in sustenance of economic activity for its littoral States,⁷ and, as a zone of competition among major powers.⁸ Moreover, the Indian Ocean Region has also been characterised by a large presence of extra-regional powers since the beginning of the colonial period in Asia and East Africa. This extra-regional influence has continued in the contemporaneous geopolitical context — albeit with different actors and in different ways — primarily due to the vested interests of these actors, but also because the region lacks a robust regional security mechanism. This absence of a regional security mechanism, especially in the maritime domain, has resulted in proliferation of a range of threats and challenges to maritime security. Consequently, extra-regional powers have mobilised efforts to address the regional maritime security challenges of which the ongoing multi-national effort in counter piracy operations off the coast of Somalia is a well-known example. Although the IOR does have some cooperative mechanisms for promoting maritime security, their effectiveness addressing the maritime security challenges, is widely debated and often doubted.

Review of Maritime Security Cooperation in the IOR

The subject of maritime security in the Indian Ocean, and now the Indo-Pacific, is quite expansive with themes ranging from power-plays by the Great Powers during the Cold War to the rise of new regional powers. The dimensions of maritime security — both from the conventional as well as non-conventional perspectives — have also been addressed adequately. Some of the many extant works, relevant to this article, are mentioned in succeeding paragraphs.

In *Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China, India and the United States*, perspectives on key issues such as traditional and non-traditional challenges, multilateral mechanisms and cooperative measures have been obtained from experts, practitioners and policy makers.⁹ Ghosh and Kumar¹⁰ make a holistic assessment of maritime security challenges in the IOR, while noting that “IONS has yet to develop the range of interoperability templates required to overcome the various threats and

⁵ David Michel and Russell Sticklor, “Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime and Security Policy Challenges”, in *Indian Ocean Rising*, eds David Michel and Russell Sticklor, (Washington DC: Stimson Center, 2012), 11.

⁶ Australian Government, Department of Defence, 2016 Defence White Paper, 61-62, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/publications/2016-defence-white-paper>

⁷ Government of India, Integrated Headquarters Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (2015), 24-32, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-maritime-security-strategy-2015>.

⁸ *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 37.

⁹ Mohan Malik ed., “Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China, India and the United States”, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

¹⁰ Yogendra Kumar and Probal K Ghosh, “The “Indo” in the “Indo-Pacific”—An Indian View”, *Naval War College Review* 73, No 2 , 60-86, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss2/7>.

challenges found in the regional maritime arena”.¹¹ A report by the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, entitled “Indo Pacific Partnership: Realising the Benefits of Economic and Maritime Cooperation”, contains a conceptualisation of both IONS and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) at the ‘Executive Level’ of the emerging Indo-Pacific architecture.¹² This report also contains a chapter on the non-traditional security issues in the Indo-Pacific and calls for a twin approach — at the sub-regional and the trans-regional levels — while having a clear focus on ‘small hotspots’ in order to address these issues.¹³ Commander Shishir Upadhyaya focuses on the current maritime security environment in the IOR as well the impediments in maritime security cooperation and has developed a framework for analysis of maritime security cooperation, which is relevant to this paper.¹⁴ Lee Corder has examined various possible models for regional cooperation in the IOR (such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)) and also posits that “*in the absence of something akin to the Track 1 ARF, perhaps supported by the Track 2 CSCAP—to work security, strategy, and policy issues at head-of government, senior-minister, senior-official, and academic levels—IONS is likely to facilitate only minor and relatively low-level, navy-to-navy cooperation*”.¹⁵ Corder’s thesis on Indian Ocean maritime security contains a detailed examination of regional maritime governance and security structures and, in passing, describes IONS progress as ‘glacial’ and the support from regional navies ‘patchy’.¹⁶

Maritime Security Challenges in the IOR

*“The IOR is demonstrably maritime. The national interests of its States range from the need to ensure the unfettered flow of maritime trade to support burgeoning, or emerging and struggling, economies to the need for effective management of the Indian Ocean’s vast “maritime commons,” both national jurisdictions and high seas.”*¹⁷

The IOR is riddled with multiple security challenges across the spectrum of threats which range from traditional (conventional State-on-State conflicts) to non-traditional (threats emanating from non-State actors or those sponsored by States without their active involvement). Many of these threats manifest under the rubric of maritime security challenges. The Indian Maritime Doctrine terms the IOR the “*hotbed of international crime*”,¹⁸ while simultaneously highlighting other threats such as maritime terrorism, natural disasters and territorial disputes between States.

¹¹ Kumar and Ghosh, “The “Indo” in the “Indo-Pacific”—An Indian View”, 64.

¹² Captain Gurpreet Khurana, “The ‘Indo-Pacific’ Idea: Origins, Conceptualisations and the Way Ahead”, in Indo-Pacific Report 2019: Realising the Benefits of Economic and Maritime Cooperation, (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2019), 19.

¹³ Sanjay Pulipaka and Paras Ratna, “The Indo-Pacific and Non-Traditional Security Issues”, in Indo-Pacific Report 2019: Realising the Benefits of Economic and Maritime Cooperation, (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2019), 162.

¹⁴ See Chapters 2 and 4 in Shishir Upadhyaya, “Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region: Assessment of India’s Maritime Strategy to be the Regional “Net Security Provider”” (PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2018), <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses1/297>.

¹⁵ Lee Corder, “Progressing Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean”, *Naval War College Review* 64, No 4, 80.

¹⁶ Lee Corder, “Indian Ocean Maritime Security: Risk-based International Policy Development”, (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2015), 176.

¹⁷ Corder, “Progressing Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean”, 71.

¹⁸ Government of India, Integrated Headquarters Ministry of Defence (Navy), Indian Maritime Doctrine, (New Delhi, 2009), 60.

Cordesman *et al* have carried out a strategic net assessment of the IOR and have highlighted a whole range of major strategic issues and risks in the IOR that extend from instability in the Persian Gulf to the fragile relationship between India and Pakistan.¹⁹ However, these are issues that do not readily lend themselves to regional cooperation — either because they are disputes of bilateral nature or are issues in which the positions assumed by State parties are deeply entrenched in historical and cultural context. Therefore, this paper will focus on ‘low end’ threats, which primarily lie in the non-traditional zone. These are, according to David Brewster, “*low-hanging fruit — while they sit at the ‘soft’ end of the spectrum of security cooperation, they can be very useful ways to develop personal relationships and interoperability and provide an opportunity to generate significant goodwill*”.²⁰

It might be useful to clarify that non-traditional threats are not exactly “low-hanging fruit”; while they do not typify warfighting aspects and reside primarily at the lower end of spectrum of threats, they can be highly resistant to resolution and therefore many of them constitute what Sam Bateman calls “*wicked problems*”.²¹ However, they are more likely to engender cooperation than are issues related traditional threats such as territorial disputes and power struggles.

Non-Traditional Maritime Security Challenges in the IOR

According to Kumar and Ghosh, many of the threats in the IOR are rooted in inadequate enforcement capabilities, which in turn, is detrimental to good order at sea and leads to a rise in maritime crime and violence.²² They point to the intensifying political conflict in Yemen, the ‘rooting’ of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as also the Al Qaeda in the western IOR, and to the problems of human trafficking, drug smuggling and ethnic strife in the eastern IOR, while observing the lack of a region-wide capability to prevent Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing or to counter the growing maritime capabilities of terrorist groups.²³

Admittedly, it is not difficult to grasp the range and depth of security challenges that bedevil the IOR. A number of reports and assessments prepared by global organisations as well as national agencies continue to draw attention to these threats and challenges, some of which are enumerated below:

Drug Trafficking and Narco-terrorism. The Indian Ocean, by virtue of its location, is home to the narcotic trade from both the ‘Golden Triangle’ and the ‘Golden Crescent’. This ocean has emerged as an important transit route for the dispatch of large

¹⁹ Anthony H Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, “The Indian Ocean Region: A Strategic Net Assessment”, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, August 2014, 6-7, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140725_Indian_Ocean_Region.pdf.

²⁰ David Brewster, “The Australia-India Framework for Security Cooperation: Another Step Towards an Indo-Pacific Partnership”, The Institute for Regional Security, 47, <https://www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Documents/11-1%20-%20Brewster.pdf>.

²¹ See Sam Bateman, “Solving the ‘Wicked Problems’ of Maritime Security: Are Regional Forums up to the Task”, *Contemporary South East Asia* 33, No 1 (April 2011). Bateman argues that several of the seemingly minor problems of maritime security — such as interpretation of the Law of the Sea, maritime zones and maritime jurisdictions, good order at sea - defy solution and hence calls them the ‘Wicked Problems’ of maritime security.

²² Kumar and Ghosh, “The “Indo” in the “Indo-Pacific”—An Indian View”, 57.

²³ Kumar and Ghosh, “The “Indo” in the “Indo-Pacific”—An Indian View”, 58-61.

consignments of narcotics.²⁴ Most of the poppy cultivation in the region takes place in the areas that lie on the rim of the Indian Ocean. Terrorist groups operate with transnational criminal organisations and drug cartels, and spawn warlords. Drug money is used to procure weapons, arms and ammunition and to support terrorist activities and insurgencies. The transshipment of these tools of terror, which are used to support terrorist activities and insurgencies, often takes place in the waters of the Indian Ocean.²⁵ A report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) points out that the Indian Ocean remains a conduit for outbound transit of heroin from Central Asia and the inbound trafficking of cocaine from South America.²⁶

Maritime Terrorism. Maritime terrorism is another serious threat that is prominent in the Indian Ocean Region. Seven of the top ten nations that suffered the most terror attacks in 2017 are in the IOR.²⁷

Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration. In the context of human trafficking, the UNODC notes that only nine per cent of human trafficking takes place across regions, with 33 per cent of the victims being trafficked within the same region or sub-region (the IOR, in this context) and 58 per cent of victims within national boundaries.²⁸ The report further notes that the Indian Ocean is the main conduit for the trafficking of persons, especially those outbound from South Asia and East Asia.²⁹ According to another estimate, human trafficking is most prevalent in Asia, and victims number about 250,000 people from South East Asia and about 150,000 from South Asia.³⁰

Natural Disasters. Natural disasters occur frequently in the IOR. A UN report on disasters in the Asia-Pacific – a region that also includes parts of the IOR – notes that in 2018, almost half of the 281 natural disaster events worldwide occurred in the Asia-Pacific region, including 8 out of the 10 deadliest ones.³¹ In the same year, as indicated by another report, Indonesia accounted for nearly half the casualties worldwide while India recorded the largest proportion of people affected by natural disasters.³² The majority of these – such as floods, droughts and earthquakes – occur in the hinterland with little role for navies in terms of providing relief. However, although the number of disasters in the

²⁴ Vice Admiral Sangram Singh Byce, “Maritime Strategy for India”, in *Maritime India*, ed KK Nayyar, (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2005), 185-192.

²⁵ *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, 60.

²⁶ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2019: Executive Summary*, 16-17, https://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2019/prelaunch/WDR19_Booklet_1_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf.

²⁷ Sanjay Pulipaka and Paras Ratna, “The Indo-Pacific and Non-Traditional Security Issues”, *The Indo-Pacific Partnership: Realising the Benefits of Maritime and Economic Cooperation*, (New Delhi: NMF, 2019), 155.

²⁸ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018”, 41, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf.

²⁹ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018*, 44.

³⁰ World Vision, “Human Trafficking in Asia”, <https://www.worldvision.com.au/docs/default-source/publications/human-rights-and-trafficking/people-trafficking-in-the-asia-region.pdf>.

³¹ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO, “Summary of the Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2019”, 02 July 2019, 4, https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Summary%20of%20the%20Asia-Pacific%20Disaster%20Report%202019_English.pdf.

³² Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), “Natural Disasters 2018”, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CREDNaturalDisaster2018.pdf>.

coastal zones are fewer, their scale is enormous, as witnessed by the cyclones *Idai*³³ and *Fani*³⁴ in 2019, the series of earthquakes and tsunamis that affected Indonesia a year earlier,³⁵ and cyclone *Ockhi* in 2017.³⁶

Maritime Piracy. Piracy and armed robbery in the Somali Basin, which had shown an increase from 2005 onwards, have reduced in recent years.³⁷ This has largely been the result of sustained anti-piracy operations by powerful coalitions formed by extra-regional navies, and global initiatives by the shipping industry.³⁸ A report published in the *International Journal of Security and its Application* concludes that in recent years, piracy attacks have reduced globally; however there are still significant risks to merchant ships from pirates.³⁹ The monthly reports and updates published by the Information Fusion Centre-IOR (IFC-IOR), India, and by the IFC, Singapore, too, highlight the continued risks to maritime security posed by piracy and armed robbery.⁴⁰

Humanitarian Crises. The IOR has also experienced a number of humanitarian crises in recent times. These include refugees, ‘Stateless’ people, and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). According to a UN report, the total number of forcibly displaced people in the world at the end of 2018 was 70.8 million. There were 26 million refugees, of whom more than two-thirds came from just five countries — Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia — four of which are IOR littoral or hinterland States.⁴¹ It is also a matter of concern that five of the top ten host-countries for refugees are also in the IOR,⁴² which complicates their own security calculi. In addition to refugees, there are a larger number of IDPs in the region. Five of the top ten countries with IDPs are in the IOR and this is another significant challenge for the Indian Ocean Region.⁴³

³³ Cyclones Idai (March 2019) and Kenneth (April 2019) were two of the top five worst storms to ever hit Mozambique. Catastrophic flooding from these storms killed more than 1500 people and affected close to 2.2 million people in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. For details visit <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2019-cyclone-idai-facts#damage>.

³⁴ Cyclone Fani hit India and Bangladesh in May 2019 and killed over 80 people, affected more than 16 million people and caused an estimated loss of about 8 billion US Dollars. See <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/odisha-fani-cyclone-assessment-report>.

³⁵ A series of earthquakes and tsunamis affected Indonesia between August and December 2018, which killed more than 3000 people and affected more than 2 million. For details see <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2018-indonesia-earthquake-facts>.

³⁶ Cyclone Ockhi struck southern India and Sri Lanka in late November and early December 2017. It killed more than 300 people and caused damage estimated more than 500 million US Dollars. For details see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyclone_Ockhi.

³⁷ According to the website of the EUNAVFOR www.eunavfor.eu, only two merchant ships have been pirated between 2013 and 2020 and none in 2019-20. Also see, Pulipaka and Ratna, “The Indo-Pacific and Non-Traditional Security Issues”, 152-3.

³⁸ Multinational effort towards suppression of piracy continues in the IOR. EUNAVFOR (Op ATALANTA), the Combined Task Force 151 (which is a part of the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)) and some other navies such as China and India continue to deploy their ships and aircraft for counter-piracy operations.

³⁹ Zhongming Xiao et al, “A Study on Global Piracy Attacks’ Trends and Characteristics Based on Data Analysis”, *International Journal of Security and Its Application* Vol.11, No.1 (2017), 233-244, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14257/ijisia.2017.11.1.192>.

⁴⁰ See the monthly reports at www.ifc.org.sg and <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/ifc-ior>.

⁴¹ UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2018”, 3, <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf>.

⁴² UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2018”, 17.

⁴³ UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2018”, 37.

IUU Fishing. IUU fishing is yet another major concern for IOR nations, especially those whose economies have a substantive dependence on fisheries and related sectors. IUU fishing represents an estimated 15 to 30 per cent of global catch, with South- and South-East Asia facing the highest incidence of IUU fishing,⁴⁴ although the problem is also pronounced off Australia's northwest coast.⁴⁵ According to the IUU Fishing Index Report 2019, countries in Asia (region) and the Indian Ocean (ocean basin) are the worst performers, implying that their vulnerability to IUU fishing as well as their management and response mechanisms are the poorest among all regions and ocean basins.⁴⁶ The IFC Singapore's monthly update illustrates the increasing trend in IUU fishing incidents for the years 2018-19.⁴⁷

Threat from Non-State Actors. There is also an increasing threat from non-State actors in the Indian Ocean. The recent attacks on a Saudi oil tanker and a Saudi naval frigate, purportedly by Houthi militia, demonstrate this threat.⁴⁸

Gunrunning. 'Gunrunning' (i.e., the illicit trafficking of firearms) is a major problem globally, and this is equally the case within the IOR. This is also closely linked with trafficking in people and drugs, as also with terrorism.

Climate Change. Lee Cordner points out that the combined impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, and ocean resource exploitation, will profoundly affect the lives of millions in a region (IOR) where many States have little capability to manage or respond to them.⁴⁹

The enormity of the challenges to maritime security posed by this plethora of non-traditional threats is evident in the IOR. Of even greater concern is the upward trend (with the exception of piracy) in the incidence of these threats. In the next section, the extant mechanisms for maritime cooperation in dealing with these threats will be examined.

Assessment of Regional Cooperation in the IOR

⁴⁴ Government of the USA, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Global Implications of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing", 19 September 2016, 6, <https://fas.org/irp/nic/fishing.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Sam Bateman et al, "New Challenges for Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean – An Australian Perspective", 6, <http://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=7724c653-9d15-4d62-8d5b-4b7f0d6a3a16>.

⁴⁶ G Macfadyen et al, "The IUU Fishing Index 2019", Poseidon Aquatic Resource Management Limited and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <http://iuufishingindex.net/include/IUU-Report.pdf>.

⁴⁷ IFC Monthly Map: March 2020,

https://www.ifc.org.sg/ifc2web/app_pages/User/common/SharingPublications.cshtml.

⁴⁸ "Houthi Terrorist Attack in Saudi Warship Al Madinah", 06 February 2017,

<http://www.arabnews.com/node/1049986/houthi-suicide-attack-saudi-warship> and "Yemen's Houthis Hit Saudi Oil Tanker Causing Slight Damage: Saudi T.V.", 25 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-tanker/yemens-houthis-hit-saudi-oil-tanker-causing-slight-damage-saudi-tv-idUSKBN1KF1H5>.

⁴⁹ Lee Cordner, "Progressing Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean", *Naval War College Review* 64, No 4, (Autumn 2011), 70.

*“Navies are inherently international and collaborative — the seas remain the great global commons and because, as I have said, the international trading system is inherently global, we have a fundamental responsibility to contribute to its safe and effective operation.”*⁵⁰

The story of maritime security cooperation in the IOR is, ironically, largely the story of its absence. It has been absent since the ascendance of European maritime powers in the region, during the colonial period, and even as late as in the latter half of the twentieth century. To be sure, even in recent past, whenever crises have emerged in the region, the regional navies have not been able to adequately or comprehensively address these challenges. For example, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia has largely been contained through the collective and cooperative effort of extra-regional powers, with little initiative among the regional navies being in evidence.⁵¹ Even in the case of recurrent natural disasters, the collective regional response has been muted.

However, it will perhaps be misleading to assume that there is an absence of capability and capacity among the IOR nations to deal with regional security challenges. Countries like India, South Africa, Australia, Indonesia and others have adequate maritime capability to address maritime security threats. What is remarkable, though, is the lack of regional coordination, habits of cooperation or a sense of regional identity.⁵² There are hardly any regional security architectures and maritime cooperation is largely focussed at a sub-regional level, which is in itself weak. According to Cordner, *“In order to flourish, collective and cooperative security needs a common perception of threat, a common ‘enemy’ and none has existed in the IOR until recently”*.⁵³ Vice Admiral MacDougall was perhaps prescient in noting, in 1995, that *“given the size of the Indian Ocean and the political, economic and cultural diversity of its littoral states, the foreseeable future is unlikely to bring speedy developments in maritime cooperation”*.⁵⁴ Commodore C Uday Bhaskar also notes that *“the IOR does not lend itself to cohesion due to the disparate political and economic profile of the littorals”*.⁵⁵ He goes on to add that the principal constraints in management of maritime challenges in the region are the disparate composition of individual states, the low political trust that prevails, enduring historical narratives concerning territoriality, and a deep-seated insecurity and mistrust about ‘the other’.⁵⁶ There are important exceptions though. For example, this assessment excludes the impressive record of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its related forums and

⁵⁰ Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, former Chief of RAN, “The Navy’s Role in the Maritime Century”, Address to the Lowy Institute, 17 August 2012, <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/chief-navy-speeches/griggs-on-march-13>.

⁵¹ Although the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) is a regional government-to-government agreement to promote and enhance cooperation against piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia, the greater burden of combating piracy has been shared by the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151) (see <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-151-counter-piracy/>), NATO under Operation OCEAN SHIELD and the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) under Operation ATALANTA.

⁵² Lee Cordner, “Indian Ocean Maritime Security: Risk-based International Policy Development”, 198.

⁵³ Cordner, “Indian Ocean Maritime Security”, 200.

⁵⁴ Mac Dougall, “The Naval View”, in *Australia’s Maritime Bridge into Asia*, eds Sam Bateman and Dick Sherwood, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin 1995), 209.

⁵⁵ C Uday Bhaskar, “The Effectiveness of Cooperative Mechanism”, in *Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China India and the United States*, ed Mohan Malik, (London: Rowmann & Littlefield, 2014), 239.

⁵⁶ C Uday Bhaskar, “The Effectiveness of Cooperative Mechanism”, 239.

mechanisms. Although ASEAN is not a truly pan-IOR organisation, it is perhaps the most prominent, powerful and effective organisation in the IOR.

Problems in Maritime Security Cooperation in the IOR

Defining Maritime Security. To begin with, many experts believe that it is problematic to arrive at a common understanding of maritime security among the IOR littoral states. Most IOR nations have diverse, and often conflicting, maritime interests. Their geographical limitations vis-à-vis their political and economic aspirations impose constraints on their understanding of maritime security. For example, Admiral Marsetio has identified eight maritime challenges that Indonesia faces in the region, namely, the competition for natural resources and sea-borne trade, territorial disputes, safety of navigation, marine environment, transnational organised crime, natural disasters, energy security and food security.⁵⁷ More recently, Rear Admiral Muhammad Ali of Indonesia, while speaking at the Sea Power Conference in Australia in 2019, also stressed the need “*to deter and combat ‘actual threats’, namely, terror, separatism, endemic disease and natural disasters*”.⁵⁸ For India, the more important challenges are coastal security, maritime terrorism, piracy and protection of seaborne trade in addition to the traditional security challenges as a result of naval build up in the IOR.⁵⁹ From an Australian perspective, protection of seaborne trade, protection of offshore oil and gas installations, terrorism, transnational crime, climate change and non-geographic threats such as cyber and space crimes appear to be more relevant.⁶⁰

Further, there are clear differences on what constitutes a threat to maritime security. While some nations want to include non-traditional threats in their definition of maritime security, some do not want to do so.⁶¹ Archipelagic and small island countries, which include some nations with large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) but inadequate capability for surveillance and control, may have prioritise threats such as climate change and IUU fishing, while nations that have relatively small maritime zones but large fishing fleets appear to be uncomfortable in including IUU fishing within the ambit of maritime security.⁶²

Diversity. Broadly speaking, the IOR is too diverse to be defined under a single regional concept. Cordesman *et al* have grappled with this problem of diversity in their strategic net assessment report. They write that the IOR is so diverse that even describing its sub-regions is a challenge because “*every aspect of culture, religion, security situationcan change by crossing a single*

⁵⁷ Admiral Dr Marsetio, “Troubled Waters: Maritime Challenges in the Asia-Pacific”, *Ionsphere*, Second Edition, (July 2013), 7-9.

⁵⁸ “Indonesian Navy Perspective: Preserving Our Oceans as Irreplaceable Heritage of Humankind”, You Tube video, 1:33:36, Royal Australian Navy, 15 Jan 2020, [Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Conference 2019 Session 2, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8548-a35hhM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8548-a35hhM).

⁵⁹ “Navy Chief: We are Building a Combat Ready, Credible and Cohesive Indian Navy”, You Tube video, 00:21:40, Bharat Shakti, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBKzA52z7tI>.

⁶⁰ Address by Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, Chief of Navy, Royal Australian Navy at the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in Tehran on 19 April 2018, <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/chief-navy-speeches-2018-indian-ocean-naval-symposium>. Also see “Responding to Transnational Maritime Security Threats”, Chief of Navy’s Address at the Fifth International Maritime Security Conference in Singapore on 16 May 2017, <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/chief-navy-speeches-responding-transnational-maritime-security-threats>.

⁶¹ Bateman, “Solving the ‘Wicked Problems’ of Maritime Security”, 2.

⁶² Bateman, “Solving the ‘Wicked Problems’ of Maritime Security”, 3.

border”.⁶³ They point out that “*real regional cooperation is at best diplomatic fiction*”.⁶⁴ It is this diversity that, in the first place, adversely impacts mutual trust and cooperation. That this diversity often manifests itself as animosity does little to help the situation.

Political Differences. Although the efforts to build maritime cooperation in the IOR began as early as the 1980s, these came to naught due to various reasons such as political differences, lack of common interests, and simply because of the perception that the cost of cooperation was simply not worth it.⁶⁵ The IOR, in large measure owing to its chequered history, is deeply entrenched in political, religious, ethnic and ideological conflict — ranging from the Persian Gulf to South- and South-East Asia.

Lack of Common Interests. Lee Cordner writes that there is “*unlikely to be a single defining moment that will galvanize action*” amongst the IOR littoral States casing them to cooperate and notes that “*late and ineffectual reaction is the most realistic and likely scenario*”.⁶⁶ This concern reverberates among many experts who note that the presence of various sub-regional structures in the IOR such as the GCC, ARF, EAS, APEC, SAARC, BIMSTEC, SADC, ASEAN, OIC, etc, have different priorities and different membership-criteria, which reflect sub-regional priorities⁶⁷ and which, in turn, “*has an operationally inhibitory effect in the IOR*”.⁶⁸

Wide Geographical Expanse. Experts also argue that the wide dispersion of littoral states across the IOR vis-à-vis the comparative proximity of nations in other regions is a challenge to effective maritime cooperation.⁶⁹ Not only is the huge geographic expanse of IOR a challenge in terms of communication, it also presents the problem of disparate strategic outlooks to accommodate a ‘one size fits all’ approach to regional security architecture.⁷⁰ Rory Medcalf writes that the [Indo-Pacific] region is too big, and its littoral states and extra-regional stakeholders are too disparate and numerous to be expected to achieve timely and practical multilateral solutions to a host of problems ranging from piracy to strategic mistrust.⁷¹

⁶³ Cordesman and Toukan, “The Indian Ocean Region: A Strategic Net Assessment”, 1.

⁶⁴ Cordesman and Toukan, “The Indian Ocean Region: A Strategic Net Assessment”, 1.

⁶⁵ Sam Bateman, “The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium – Will the Navies of the Indian Ocean Unite?”, RSIS Commentaries, 17 March 2008, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 3, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/1055-the-indian-ocean-naval-symposi/>.

⁶⁶ Cordner, “Progressing Maritime Security in the IOR”, 76.

⁶⁷ Michael L'Estrange, “An Overview of Indian Ocean Security Architecture”, in *Protecting the Ability to Trade in the Indian Ocean Maritime Economy*, Proceedings of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Seminar 2014, ed Andrew Forbes, Sea Power Series No 3, Sea Power Centre - Australia, 11.

⁶⁸ Bernard H Teuteberg, “Operationalising Regional Maritime Cooperation Towards Ensuring Collective Maritime Security for the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation”, in *IONS: Contemporary Transnational Challenges: International Maritime Connectivities*, eds Ravi Vohra et al, (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2008), 149-150.

⁶⁹ Teuteberg, “Operationalising Regional Maritime Cooperation”, 150. Also see Bateman, “The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium – Will the Navies of the Indian Ocean Unite?”, 3.

⁷⁰ L'Estrange, “An Overview of Indian Ocean Security Architecture”, 11.

⁷¹ Rory Medcalf, “Mapping the Indo Pacific: China, India and the United States”, in Mohan Malik ed, *Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China India and the United States*, (London: Rowmann & Littlefield, 2014), 55.

Lack of Resources and Capacity. Many regional States lack the ability to protect their maritime interests, let alone contribute to regional efforts.⁷² This deficiency is even more pronounced because of large-scale socio-economic problems such as poverty, illiteracy, poor health and sanitation and unemployment. Almost half of the IOR States have ‘Medium’ to ‘Low’ Human Development Indices (HDI), which implies that for these States, it will be more important to devote their resources towards poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, health and education.⁷³ This limitation is compounded by the effects of natural disasters and humanitarian crises that have been brought out earlier in this paper.

Role of Regional and Extra-Regional Powers. The IOR, till very recently and even now, did not have strong littoral powers that could influence regional affairs, although countries like Australia, India, Indonesia, Iran, South Africa and Saudi Arabia do exert varying degrees of influence in the region. As a result, the IOR has been influenced largely by extra-regional powers which have significant maritime interests in the region. This is at times perceived as interference and is not welcomed by some IOR nations.⁷⁴ At the same time, many experts stress the need to recognise the interests of extra-regional powers and accommodate their involvement.⁷⁵ They also maintain that the role of these extra-regional powers is crucial in maintaining regional stability and security. Take for example, the commonly encountered view that “*External powers must be involved in IOR security if arrangements are to be meaningful and have a chance of being effective*”⁷⁶ and that “*...not involving extra-regional countries that have major interest and stakes in the region may prove to be a major stumbling block*”.⁷⁷ As far as the extra-regional powers themselves are concerned, they continue to view the IOR as a region of significant interest and intend to remain focussed on regional affairs,⁷⁸ even while the littoral States of the region would continue to emphasise the preponderance of national sovereignty in the international order.⁷⁹ Some experts have suggested “*the creation of ‘middle power coalitions’: informal arrangements where regional players cooperate with one another on strategic issues, working in self-selecting groups that do not include China or the United States.*”⁸⁰

It is apparent that there are genuine concerns about maritime security and stability in the region amongst IOR littoral States, which potentially provide the foundation for building cooperation. Simultaneously, however, there are overriding individual interests that tend to blunt cooperative

⁷² Lee Cordner, “Indian Ocean Maritime Security: Risk-based International Policy Development”, 199.

⁷³ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Human Development Indices and Indicators 2018”, <http://hdr.undp.org>.

⁷⁴ Lee Cordner, “Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region: Compelling and Convergent Agendas”, *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs*, Vol 2(1), (2010), 16.

⁷⁵ Cordner, “Progressing Maritime Security in the IOR”, 69.

⁷⁶ Cordner, “Progressing Maritime Security in the IOR”, 69.

⁷⁷ Jane Chan, “Maritime Cooperation in the Indian Ocean”, ed Andrew Forbes, Sea Power Series 3 Proceedings of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Seminar 2014, Sea Power Centre, Australia, 109.

⁷⁸ Andrew C Winner, “The United States and Maritime Security Challenges”, in *Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China India and the United States*, ed Mohan Malik, (London: Rowmann & Littlefield, 2014), 183.

⁷⁹ Arun Prakash, “Commonality of Maritime Challenges and Options for a Cooperative IOR Maritime Security Structure”, in *IONS: Contemporary Transnational Challenges: International maritime Connectivities*, eds Ravi Vohra et al, (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2008), 190.

⁸⁰ Rory Medcalf and C Raja Mohan, “Responding to Indo-Pacific Rivalry: Australia, India and Middle Power Coalitions”, 1, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/responding-indo-pacific-rivalry-australia-india-and-middle-power-coalitions>.

initiatives. Columban Lebas has succinctly summarised this contradiction: *“Undermined by a sort of fatal propensity for fragmentation, this area seems to waver between a common interest for stability and prosperity, and centrifugal forces that easily counter these positive intentions.”*⁸¹

Conclusion

The IOR faces a multitude of maritime security challenges – traditional as well as non-traditional. In this article, which attempts to examine the complexities in forging a cooperative regional maritime security construct, non-traditional security threats have been elaborated upon. The traditional or conventional security threats, which would figure high on the threat-priority list of a State, have not been addressed because these primarily pertain to sovereign interests and do not readily lend themselves to a cooperative solution, not the least in a regional context.

Several authors have written about existing groups and mechanisms in the IOR which are aimed at facilitating maritime security cooperation.⁸² The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is one such mechanism that facilitates navy-to-navy dialogue. The role of IONS in promoting naval cooperation and maritime security will be analysed in the second part of this series. Many of the problems of cooperation that have been highlighted earlier in this paper also adversely impact the functioning IONS, whose effectiveness will be also assessed in the second part.

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⁸¹ Columban Lebas, “New Stakes in the Indian Ocean and French Policy”, *Ionsphere*, Second Edition, (July 2013), 70.

⁸² See Cordner, “Indian Ocean Maritime Security: Risk-based International Policy Development”, 172-180 and Upadhyaya, “Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region”, 37-40.